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SPITFIRE SAUL, KING OF THE RUSTLERS; Or, QUEEN DIXIE'S GRAND "ROUND-UP."

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," "OLD '49,"
"THREE-FINGERED JACK," "THE LONG-HAIRED PARDS," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING," ETC., ETC.



A JOYOUS CRY ESCAPED THE LIPS OF THE BRAVE WOMAN AS SHE SAW A HORSEMAN RIDING TOWARD THEM AT BREAKNECK SPEED.

Spitfire Saul, KING OF THE RUSTLERS;

OR,

Queen Dixie's Grand "Round-Up."

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "THE OLD BOY OF TOMBSTONE,"
"REVOLVER ROB," "OLD '49," "JO-
AQUIN, THE SADDLE KING,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

KING SAUL IN DURANCE VILE.

"You're gittin' too mighty 'tic'lar fer a man in your condish, my covey! Don't make a mite o' difference to me whether you eat or not. It's on'y a waste o' good grub, anyhow. It'll never putt no fat onto your ribs. Jest make it harder on the boys, an' take a' extry kink out the rope!"

A surly growl, from an ill-favored specimen of humanity, who punctuated his short, crisp sentences with smoke-puffs from a most villainously scented pipe, addressed to a man who occupied the further extremity of the little, poorly-lighted room; a man in contrast with whom he appeared as a satyr to Hyperion.

Without, the sun was blazing fiercely down from the zenith, heating the atmosphere until all inanimate objects subjected to its direct rays, seemed afflicted with an ague-chill as they quivered and danced amid the refracted rays of heat. The light was painfully brilliant, but little of it came into that close, disagreeably scented room. There was only one opening in the apartment, besides the barred door; a small, oblong slit in the thick adobe walls, rendered still more secure by stout iron bars, welded together where they crossed at right angles.

Squatting on a low stool, his body humped over, his elbows resting on his knees, his black, hairy hands toying with a huge revolver, sullenly eying the man beyond, was the speaker. Not a handsome man was Doc Strader. To judge from his face, his voice, his carriage, a more utter villain never trod the footstool.

Also upon a stool, sat his opposite, forming a striking contrast, for it might with truth be said that they were opposites in every sense of the word, save one: both were endowed with a more than ordinary supply of animal courage.

Tall, elegantly shaped, combining wonderful strength with great activity; broad shoulders, round, swelling chest, tapering to a small, yet powerful waist; long limbs, perfectly shaped, but with the muscles of a gladiator; hands and feet small, shapely, white, and seemingly soft as those of a woman.

A leonine head, bearing a wealth of corn-colored hair, fine, silken, curling in little rings over his high, white forehead, falling in careless locks upon his shoulders and down his back. A beard of the same hue, forking in the middle as it reached his bosom, covering all his face save the nose, long and straight, with thin, sensitive nostrils, the eyes large and brilliant, blue as the sky of midsummer, and the forehead. His hair was parted in the middle, crossed near the crown by a bloody gash that had laid the bone bare.

His garb was of fine broadcloth and finer linen, though both bore traces of hard usage, being rent, and stained with dust and blood-spots.

He bore no weapons. Instead, upon his wrists were stout handcuffs, connected by a short chain. Around each ankle was a heavy iron band, a chain from each leading up to an iron belt which was locked around his waist.

Few men, if strangers to them both, but would have believed the positions should be reversed; that Doc Strader should have borne the chains instead of occupying the position of guard over the other. His face seemed to stamp him as a brutal criminal. Instead, he was a man honest and true. Rough in speech, maybe, when the occasion seemed to call for harshness; a lover of justice itself, rather than its empty forms; but a faithful friend, a loving husband, and kind father.

The other—King Saul, as he chose to call himself: Spitfire Saul, King of the Rustlers, as he was even more widely known—looked the demigod. What he really was, it is the province of this story to narrate.

A low, musical laugh parted his lips until his white teeth glimmered in that dim light through the silken mustaches, but there was an unpleasant sneer in his voice as he spoke:

"I was not fool enough to expect a different answer, so I am not disappointed, old man. It was worth the trouble of asking, though, just to see how you tremble in your boots at the mere idea of setting my hands free to eat in comfort. And with this chain holding me to the wall—bah!"

Turning his head, King Saul glanced at the massive links which were fastened to his iron belt behind, then secured to a strong staple in

the wall. The chain was long enough for him to stand erect, to take a pace or two from the wall, to lie down at full length, but too short for him to reach either corner of the room or its center.

Doc Strader grinned grimly.

"You're a mighty innercent cuss, you be! You wouldn't step outside ef I was to knock off them darbies, would ye? Wouldn't knock out my brains, ef I was to give ye a openin'—oh, no! That ain't *your* sort! You never did nothin' wrong! You ain't Spitfire Saul, the biggest cattle-thief an' wust road-agent in seventeen States! You hain't got more blood on your han's then would sink a hull rijiment so deep in Tophet that the Old Boy himself couldn't find 'em without soundin' with a deep-sea line! Somebody else! Waal, jest to make you relish that chuck a bit better, take this pinch o' seasonin'; afore the sun goes down, you'll pull hemp fer that very critter, whether you're Spitfire Saul, or a angel!"

"Indeed!" with a low, careless laugh, as he tore the tough meat on the tin plate to bits with his manacled hands. "Bring your wife to see the circus, old man, and she'll tell you that she's just learned the difference between a *man* and a baboon. I don't brag much on my morals, but I'm rather proud of my good looks!"

"That sounds spunky, but I've hearn jest sech talk afore now. Mighty brave they was, long's the rope was out o' sight, but when it come danglin' afore their eyes, when they hearn the roar o' voices, all singin' the tune o' blood fer blood; when they felt the hemp closin' 'round thar thrapples an' shettin' off thar wind—then they wilted, jest as you'll wilt an' cry an' beg fer marcy—"

Strader's voice choked, his face growing purple, his eyes growing blood-shot and almost starting from his head, his stumpy fingers working convulsively as though itching to close upon the throat of the man opposite and perform the duty of the hangman's rope.

The careless sneer vanished from the face of King Saul. Until now, he had believed the talk of his guard empty sound, but now he began to think different.

For a moment he gazed fixedly into his face, then resumed his dinner, with affected carelessness, saying:

"May I never want bite nor sup until that day comes! Trying comes before hanging, nowadays—"

"You've already bin tried all you'll git, 'cept to see how snug a rope 'll fit your neck," with a hard laugh.

"Look here, old man; what do you mean?"

"Jest this; The boys is tired o' ketchin' thieves an' 'sassins fer the lawyers to turn loose ag'in. They've got to draw the line some'rs, an' they've 'cluded to draw it at *you*—an' draw it round your throat so almighty tight that you won't never complain o' the job!"

"In other words, they're talking up a lynching picnic?"

"The talkin's past an' done with. They're all ready to act," said Strader grimly. "Mebbe you'll hev time to finish that grub; mebbe you won't. Anyway, I'm open to give hefty odds that you'll be cold meat long afore the sun sets this evenin'!"

King Saul saw that he was speaking the plain truth, and his countenance changed. Let a man be the bravest of the brave, and he cannot meet death in such a shape without his blood chilling and his nerve weakening when first brought beneath the shadow of the rope. Still more reason when one is manacled hand and foot, wholly helpless.

"Look here, old man, are you giving it to me straight?" he asked seriously.

"Straight as though you was a angel, 'stead of a devil," was the prompt response. "You'll pull hemp, *sure*!"

"I was promised a fair trial. I deny being the man they call me. I'm an honest gentleman—"

"Tophet's full o' jest sech gents!" rudely broke in the guard, the long-smoldering fire in his heavy eyes bursting into full blaze. "You can't pull the wool over my eyes, with your slick talk. I *know* ye. You're Spitfire Saul. You've killed an' stole an' run off cattle tell the very stones in the hills cry out ag'inst ye. Every minit that I've bin keepin' watch over ye, hes bin a powerful temptation to me—some-thing keeps a-whisperin' to me to blow your pizen brains out—an' I'd 'a' done it long afore now, ef I hedn't knowed that the boys meant to make sure work o' ye afore the lawyer-men could snake ye out o' limbo."

Doc Strader stopped abruptly, and struck a match to relight the pipe which had gone out during his hot, excited speech. His hands trembled like those of a man suffering with palsy. A far less acute observer than King Saul would have been convinced that he was speaking nothing save the truth.

An ugly light flashed into the blue eyes, but it had vanished before the guard looked up again, and the prisoner was once more the careless, reckless dare-devil.

"You're very kind and thoughtful, old fellow, not to spoil the sport of the boys. I suppose you're fond of such fun?"

"I will be when it's *you* that's kickin' the air!"

"Thanks! I'll put in a few extra touches of the light fantastic, just to amuse you, if I don't forget," with a short laugh. "But if you are fond of fun—and you look as though you were chuck-full of it—let me tell you how you can get a skin full. Just lend me one of your pop-guns, and then stand aside when the boys come. Of course they'll get the best of me in the end, but I'll make it lively for them while my wind holds out. You'll think a he-old brass band has broken loose."

"Come; what do you say? Give a fellow one chance for his life. You won't sleep any the worse for it, when your turn comes for croaking."

"Reckon I'm a durn fool?" indignantly snorted Strader.

"Not a bit of it, old fellow," and King Saul threw all of his wondrous personal magnetism into his voice and gaze as he spoke. "The man who tries to buy you for a fool will waste both time and money. What I *do* take you for is this: a man too white to see a fellow-being dragged to death by a howling, unreasoning mob, without being given a single chance for life."

"Mind you, I ain't asking you to fight for me, though you were placed here as guard for that very purpose, if the occasion should ever arise. They are your friends. Maybe some of your relatives are among them. I don't ask you to fight, but I *do* ask you, as a white man, to give me a revolver when we hear them coming, that I may die fighting, not like a dog—"

When King Saul began, his tone had been hard and sneering. He had no hopes of his request being complied with. But his voice grew more and more earnest as he proceeded, until all pretense was cast aside, and he was pleading for his life with swift, earnest utterance. Only to stop short as Doc Strader knocked back the brim of his slouched hat, revealing a face that was full of mingled triumph and intense hatred.

"You're beggin' to me—beggin' fer your life like a cowardly coyote ketched in the trap! I swore that the day should come, an' I knowed that this was the one, but I didn't look fer the words afore the boys come with the rope. Marcy you want? A chance fer *your* life? Say it over ag'in!"

King Saul stared at him luridly, but not a sound escaped his lips. The brief weakness was past, and he was once more himself, outwardly cold and hard, but with a volcano blazing inside.

"You wo 't? But it don't matter," added Strader, with a low, growling laugh that was far more ferocious than mirthful. "You've begged, an' to me! I'd 'a' chopped off my right han' rather then miss them words! Shell I tell ye why?"

He paused for a reply, but King Saul made none. He turned his whole attention to the food in the dish that still rested upon his knees, devouring the coarse viands with a relish that told of a hearty appetite.

Strader was too intensely excited to be daunted by this. The fierce words which had been struggling for utterance ever since King Saul was brought here a prisoner, must find a vent, or he would suffocate.

"Shell I tell ye? 'Ca'se of my little brother which *you* butchered! On'y a boy. Hardly big an' old enough to leave his mammy's apron-string. Yit you killed him—butchered him like he was a sheep-stealin' cur—hung him by the neck, though he begged of you to let him die like a man, with his eyes open an' by a bullet! He begged, but it wasn't fer *life*."

"On'y a boy, mind ye. You could still smell the mother's milk on his breath. Yit he fit you an' your gang ontel it looked like he'd whip the hull kit single-handed, an' only give in when his last bit o' lead was shot away, an' thar was hafe a dozen holes clean through him."

"He was so bad hurt that he'd 'a' died, anyway, but you wasn't content with that. One o' his bullets hed drawn your blood, an' you swore that he should die the dog's death. You laughed at an' cussed him when he begged—not fer *life*, mind ye—an' slapped his bloody lips with your dirty foot while your hell-hounds were fixin' the lariat!"

Choking with emotion, Doc Strader rose erect, one hairy hand clutching at his shirt-collar, as though for more air.

Coolly, mockingly King Saul watched him, and there was not the slightest trace of emotion in his tones as he spoke:

"So that young cub was your brother? He was gritty. I've thought of the little rascal more than once since then, and almost felt sorry that I was so hasty. He would have made a prime Rustler, with such training as I could give him."

Doc Strader made a swift gesture that knocked the bowl of his pipe from its stem, falling to the floor and rolling half-way between him and the prisoner. His hand dropped upon the butt of a revolver, and for a moment the life of the captive depended upon a hair; but then the guard recovered from his temporary insanity, shaking his shaggy head with a grim, hard, merciless laugh.

"Not *this* time, Spitfire Saul, though I come monstrous nigh fergettin' myself. 'Tain't death that you're so much afraid of; I'll give ye that much credit. The idee o' bein' choked to death with a rope is what cuts deepest. An' the rope you'll taste afore the sun goes down, an' it'll come true what I swore when I found out who it was that butchered my poor little brother—"

"I *did* kill him; that I admit," broke in King Saul, cutting him short. "I didn't know who the little bull-dog was, or anything about him, save that he spoiled all my plans by his cursed folly. For that I killed him. I'm glad I did, since you claim him as a brother. I'd say the same if the rope was around my neck and you tugging at the other end. But that will never come to pass. Instead of hanging me, or seeing me hung—listen!"

"I swear that I will kill you. I swear that I will hunt out your relatives, one after another, and send them to join you in Tophet, before this moon grows old. Put *that* in your pipe and smoke it, old fellow!"

Uttering a short, hard laugh, Doc Strader sunk back upon his stool, thrusting the stem of his pipe between his teeth, pulling vigorously at it, until then in ignorance of the bowl having fallen to the floor. Not until he struck a match to relight the tobacco did he discover the truth, so great had been his excitement, so intense was it even now.

King Saul had made the discovery first, and his blazing eyes drooped for fear the guard might read therein the sudden hope which found birth in that fact, so trifling on its face.

He pushed his stool back until it touched the wall, and wiped the tin dish with a bit of corn bread, but all the time he was staring at the still smoking pipe-bowl as it lay on the floor, only a few feet beyond the line which the stout chain at his waist permitted him to trace.

He heard Doc Strader rise and advance, but he did not raise his head nor make a motion until he saw the black, hairy hand reaching down to pick up the pipe. Then—

King Saul flung himself headlong, his manacled wrists joined, his fingers holding the heavy chain in a lump, a hoarse snarl of deadly hatred breaking from his lips.

Had he leaped forward on his feet, he must have failed to reach the guard. As it was, with body and arms extended at full length, he was barely successful, the iron and chains descending with a sickening crash upon the bowed head of Doc Strader, knocking him to the floor.

Almost any skull would have been shattered like an egg-shell by that terrible blow, and a snarling cry of savage triumph grated through the clinched teeth of the outlaw as he felt that his guard was forever disposed of.

He fell himself with stunning force, but that was no time to think of common hurts, and he clutched at the arm of Doc Strader, even as he fell upon the stone floor.

The force with which the chain jerked him back, caused King Saul to miss his grip, and a howl of fury broke from him as he saw Strader roll over, still living, still dangerous, though stunned and bewildered by that terrible shock.

His fingers closed upon one leg, and with powers renewed by the critical emergency, he dragged the guard closer, snatching with his free hand at the revolver which he saw in the belt, tearing it from the holster just as Strader jerked himself free and rolled away, uttering a hoarse cry to alarm the sentry without, at the same time trying to draw a pistol.

It was the death of one or the other now, and King Saul quickly realized that fact. *Click—click!* sounded the hammer as the revolver was cocked, and then came the report.

Doc Strader, hardly realizing what had occurred, his eyes filled with the blood that streamed from a great gash on his skull, was just rising to his knees, just pulling forth another pistol, when the bullet crashed through his brain, and he fell forward upon his face, a corpse!

The next moment came a heavy thumping on the door.

CHAPTER II.

TWO FAIR AMAZONS.

Two horses, tearing over the broad plain, racing side by side, eying each other in generous rivalry, their flanks heaving, their coats glistening with sweat, flecked here and there with little patches of foam, as though they had been ridden hard and far. Yet they bore hard upon the bits as the curb was pressed by their fair riders, and though yielding, still moving restlessly as though longing to renew the race.

"This is glorious—this is life worth living!" exclaimed one flushed beauty, her eyes sparkling vividly as she drew off one gauntlet and fanned her face.

"Is it not?" echoed her companion, her complexion clear, her breath even, apparently as cool and comfortable as though at home in her heat-guarded room, instead of beneath the blazing afternoon sun of New Mexico. "And to think of those compassionate doll-babies, who never drew a breath of air that was not contaminated by the filth of cities—think how they pitied us poor girls, condemned to waste our

sweetness on the desert air, to be exiled here beyond all civilization, where balls and beaux and billet-doux are unknown—ha! ha!"

Long and musically she laughed, this queenly *brune*, while her companion joined her with equal gusto. Evidently they were in no danger of breaking their hearts over their unfortunate fate.

Lucille Debonay and Ora Ainsley had been friends from childhood, bound together by no ordinary ties of love. A like friendship had connected their parents, until death severed the bond, leaving little Ora an orphan, when Pierre Debonay, so cold and austere to those who could not look into the heart of gold which lay so far beneath that chilling exterior, with tears in his eyes at the loss of his one male friend, closed the death-filmed orbs of the father and took the little orphan home and to his heart.

From that day the two girls had never been separated.

Carroll Ainsley died a rich man, and his will named Pierre Debonay his sole executor and guardian of his only child.

The two estates were joined, and from thence on carried and managed as one. In losing one father, Ora had found another, equally as kind, and even more indulgent, so the deep wound in her heart gradually closed, until, at the time when we introduce them, she hardly realized that she had ever known another parent.

Side by side the two girls grew up together, with only Pierre Debonay for a tutor, and when their daily lessons were over, running wild over the vast cattle ranch. Luckily no harm came to them, and the rough cowboys, even the most surly and wicked, fairly worshipped them.

They taught them to ride the wildest horses, to use the rifle or revolver like veteran marksmen, to cast the lasso as deftly as the best among their ranks; yet all this without a word, look, thought or action at which the most fastidious could take umbrage.

One day the eyes of the ranchero were opened. He saw what had never before occurred to him: that his children were growing up to womanhood. He knew that he was wronging them in keeping them thus apart from more civilizing influences, and though it took more than one day of gloomy reflection, more than one terrible wrenching of his tenderest heart-strings, he made up his mind to part from them, for their own good.

There was a pretty rebellion when he made this decision known to the spoiled beauties. There was weeping and wailing, coaxing and pleading, but Pierre Debonay knew how to be firm, even while his own heart was repeating their prayers with redoubled fervor, and one day they turned their faces toward the rising sun.

A month later Pierre Debonay returned to the ranch alone. He plunged into business with a feverish energy that amazed his little army of retainers, though they soon learned that he was trying to forget the absence of his children. And in course of time he appeared to succeed. At least he returned to his former mode of life, leaving all to his foreman, only quitting his books when his presence became a necessity.

And so the years rolled by, until three of them had joined the past. Not once during all that time, had the ranchero visited his daughters, though many and ardent were their prayers for him to do so. He had his reasons, which the course of this story may make clear.

Then the girls graduated, and came home. Taller, more perfectly developed, more lady-like, perhaps, but still their old selves, as the cowboys soon learned, when they wandered away from the ranch.

Tall and queenly, Lucille was a *brune* of the purest type, her complexion dazzlingly clear, yet proof against heat and sun. Her eighteen years had fully developed her form, graceful, yet voluptuously molded; a woman for love of whom many a man would count death as nothing.

Ora Ainsley was smaller, but equally as perfect after her style. With golden hair, waxen skin, whose only drawback was its susceptibility to tan and freckles; a rose-bud mouth, eyes like the summer sky in hue, now languid and melting, anon running over with sparkling mischief; a voice that was music itself, and a temper that was all but angelic.

Wondrously enticing they looked now, garbed in their short, close-fitting riding-habits. Around each trim waist was buckled a patent-leather belt, containing a gold-hilted dagger and brace of small, but serviceable revolvers. Each wore spurs, and at the saddle-bows hung a looped lasso and a whip with short handle and long lash, *fac-similes* of the regulation cowboy badge, in all save size.

"The first and last, maybe, but the other?" and Ora cast a roguish look into the face of her companion. "There are worse-looking cavaliers to be met with than in this desert."

"Among the Rangers, for instance, eh, pet?" laughed Lucille. "Is it not time for the gallant lieutenant to be straying this way?"

"You needn't talk!" with a little pout. "There's a certain person whom they call Gentle Guy—"

"Whom father declares a marvel as foreman—"

"And her father's daughter estimates still more highly! Come, Lu. You know I told you all about Mark, just as soon as it happened, but the moment I begin to speak about Guy Abbey you turn the subject or snub me outright. Is that fair?"

"You should take the hint, then, and avoid an unwelcome subject," was the calm retort.

"Now, Lu!" pouted the blonde. "Am I a fool? Haven't I eyes? Can't I see that the poor fellow is over head and ears in love with you, though you keep him in misery all the time with your proud, haughty ways? Time and again I've vowed that I'd tell him—"

"Ora, if you dare!" flashed Lucille, her eyes gleaming, her hand clinching; but suddenly changing her tone: "Tell him what? What is there you can tell him, I wonder?"

"That you dream about him—you *do*, you *do*!" laughing, as she touched her mustang with the spur and caused it to bound out of reach. "More than once I have heard you breathe his name when asleep. He would give his right hand to know all that I know—"

"Then let him ask and make the discovery for himself," said Lucille, her cheeks flushed, but with a softer light in her eyes. "You must not betray me, Ora—"

"Then there is something to betray!" eagerly cried the younger girl, coming closer. "Tell me, Lu. You know I can keep a secret. I'll never breathe a word, unless you give me leave. You *do* love him—I could almost hate you if you didn't! I never saw a handsomer man—save one."

"Mark Boyd, of course! Well, little one, yonder *motte* looks cool and comfortable. Let's ride there, and perhaps, maybe—I'll let you do some more guessing."

Turning abruptly to the left, where grew a good-sized clump of timber, fringed with dense undergrowth of bushes, Lucille touched her horse with the spur, but almost instantly drew rein as several dun-colored cattle broke forth from the cover, tossing their heads and sniffing loudly as they stared at the gayly-dressed riders.

"On guard, Ora!" cried Lucille, sharply. "They mean mischief. Those are none of our stock. They're Mavericks."

Not very dangerous-looking animals to the uninitiated. Small, light-limbed, shaped more like a deer than ordinary specimens of the bovine race, were it not for the long horns, shining as though polished, white at the base and to near the tips, there black as ebony, making a beautiful double curve, which left the points full four feet apart.

Graceful, almost elegant-looking creatures, even to the bull which stood at the head of the herd. He was a little more heavily built than the members of his little harem, but still very different from the clumsy-looking, ponderous bulls which one is accustomed to see in the older States.

To all seeming, he was the most peaceable one of the lot, lazily switching away the flies as he drooped his head, while the cows snorted, pawed up the sand, shaking their long horns threateningly as they made short rushes toward the riders, only lacking a leader to make their onset a stern reality.

A spirit of mischief appeared to take possession of Ora, who dashed ahead of her companion, turning a glance over her shoulder as she freed the lasso from her saddle-bow.

"Come, Lu! there's none to see and laugh at us. Come—for a taste of the good old days before we were finished young ladies!"

"Ora, stop!" cried Lucille, sharply, as the other dashed ahead, swinging her lasso around her head. "Those are Mavericks! They are not such tame cattle—"

If heard, her warning words were unheeded. The little blonde seemed possessed by some mischievous spirit. Straight at the cattle she urged her horse, her clear, musical voice raised in a shout that was meant to cow the cattle, and turn them to flight, that she might the better display her skill with the weapon which whistled around her sunny head. But in this she was foiled. Instead of fleeing, the Mavericks stood their ground, tossing their long horns, pawing up the earth, snorting more loudly than ever, while the bull made a short rush that carried him in advance of his harem.

The cast was made and proved successful. The loop settled over the long horns of the bull, drawing close as the well-trained horse wheeled abruptly in obedience to the spur. There came a shock as the rope tightened, and a cry of victory broke from the maiden's lips as the bull plunged forward on its knees, but the note of triumph changed to one of chagrin as the Maverick nimbly regained its feet, and charged swiftly, with an angry bellow.

"Cut and run, child!" cried Lucille, dashing forward, her beautiful countenance all aglow.

Both horse and rider were thoroughly surprised. The touch of a lasso ordinarily strikes terror to the heart of the boldest bovine, turning it in headlong flight which only the more surely completes its discomfiture, but not so with this bull Maverick. Tail on end and bellying savagely, it shook its polished horns and

plunged straight at its tormentors, looking so savage that the frightened horse darted away on a tangent so swiftly, that when the lasso was tightened, the sudden pluck cast it to its knees, almost unseating its rider.

With a cry of alarm, Lucille urged her horse across the front of the bull, plying her whip with swift, savage strokes, aiming at the blazing eyes, hoping to blind the animal ere it could work further mischief.

Stung to fury, with the blood streaming down his shaggy frontlet from the gashes cut through hair and hide by the steel-like cracker of rawhide, the Maverick turned upon this new antagonist, making short, swift charges, foiled only by the wonderful activity of the trained horse aided by its skillful rider.

The cows, bellowing angrily, rushed forward, circling around, filling the air with sand and dust, but never coming to close quarters, dashing away whenever the horse ridden by Lucille charged near them. But with the passage of each moment, they were growing bolder and bolder, and the cool-nerved maiden saw that she and her friend were in no ordinary peril.

"Cut the lasso!" she cried, still plying the terrible lash. "Cut loose, and run for it!"

Almost hurled from her saddle, Ora for the moment lost her presence of mind. Her horse, too, received a heavy shock, and blind with terror at that wild routing, scrambled to its feet and dashed madly away.

Unfortunately, in charging on Lucille, the Maverick had changed their relative positions, and the frightened horse was unconsciously crossing its front just as the bull lost sight of Lucille. Fairly beside itself with rage and fury, it rushed after the horse, and before she realized the fact, Lucille was caught inside the loop formed by the lasso, just as her steed was turning around.

With an ugly twang, the rawhide rope tightened against the black's legs on the right side, jerking them from beneath it, and hurling both horse and rider to the ground.

More by good fortune than management, Lucille alighted on her feet, and though she staggered on and fell, she received no material injury, rapidly recovering her feet, just as two of the nearest cows rushed savagely upon her.

An involuntary cry escaped her lips, for death seemed assured, but with the courage of desperation, she drew a revolver and swiftly discharged it full into the face of the foremost cow.

The lead sped true, and the animal fell dead at her feet, its long horns tearing up the sand and casting it over her dress as she darted swiftly aside, just in time to avoid the second animal, which stumbled and fell over its fallen companion.

Ora heard the cry and shot, and glancing back, though almost shaken from her seat by the shock which had overthrown the horse of her friend, her courage and presence of mind instantly returned as she realized the peril which threatened her more than sister.

A single slash of her knife severed the lasso, and with a cry of encouragement, she turned her horse and, despite its reluctance, urged it back to the scene.

The maddened bull savagely charged her, but she adroitly eluded its rush, plying her whip with a force and skill that left a bloody mark wherever the lash struck, and jerking up her animal as she reached the side of Lucille, she bent over and caught her by the shoulder.

"Quick! leap up behind me—"

Too late! The cows, still further enraged by the scent of freshly flowing blood, were charging with lowered crests from one side, while the bull, wheeling, was thundering down from another quarter.

"To the timber!" cried Lucille, grasping the saddle-bow with her right hand, while with the pistol transferred to the left, she opened fire upon the cows. "Once there, we can—"

She could not finish the sentence. The terrified horse dashed away, almost throwing her from her feet and breaking her hold upon the saddle-bow. She must have fallen at full length, only for the grasp of Ora, whose strength was trebled by the dread emergency.

The bull and the cows came together at the point where their slain companion lay, and attracted by the scent of blood they paused over the carcass, bellowing and routing like insane creatures. Only for this brief respite, one or both of the fair Amazons must have fallen victims to their fury.

Before half the distance to the *motte* was covered, half a score of dun-colored cattle burst from the cover, and halting, with pawing hoofs and tossing horns, barred the way. A cry of dismay escaped the lips of poor Lucille, as her foot caught on a hummock, and she fell to the ground.

"Leave me—save yourself, Ora!" she gasped, painfully.

"Both or neither! We will live or die together!" was the bold response, as Ora leaped from the saddle to her aid.

Snorting loudly, her horse broke away, leaving them afoot.

CHAPTER III.

GENTLE GUY TO THE RESCUE.

A DESPAIRING cry burst from the blanched lips of Lucille Debonay as she staggered to her feet.

"You might have saved yourself, poor child!" she murmured, as she grasped Ora by the hand. "But now—Heaven pity us!"

"By deserting you? How could I?"

There was time for no more speech, but volumes could have added nothing to that brief exposition of true love.

Afoot, hemmed in by a full score of cattle, scarcely less to be dreaded than so many grizzly bears or mountain lions. Even if safely in the saddle the situation would not be without peril. It was a hundred-fold increased by the flight of one horse and death of the other, for while wild cattle seem to have an instinctive fear, in greater or less degree of man when mounted, they possess a still more marked antipathy for a human being when afoot. Even those most used to the sight and company of mankind, who will pay little attention to any one while in the saddle, will flock curiously around the same person should they chance to meet him afoot, and right lucky may he be accounted if he escapes their attentions with nothing worse than a thorough fright.

No mean peril this, but increased a hundred-fold when the long-horns are utterly wild; "Maveracks" that have never known the degrading touch of lasso or branding-iron; more yet, when a single harem is met in the height of the breeding season; and, worst of all, with the hot scent of freshly-flowing blood rising in their nostrils.

Pale as death, yet with her every nerve tightly strung, Lucille glanced swiftly at the two bands of cattle, summing up their chances in a single breath.

"If we can scatter them long enough to reach the timber, we're safe. If—We must!"

A faint little laugh broke from Ora's lips.

"If it was something grand—something with even the faintest tinge of romance—it would not be so hard. But a lot of cows—bah!"

A curious little speech, but strongly characteristic of the romance-loving girl, who was just then proving herself very practical indeed.

With swift dexterity Ora tucked the front of her skirt up under the leather belt, thus giving herself the free and untrammelled use of her limbs, where to stumble and fall might easily prove fatal. Then, drawing a revolver, she uttered a shrill cry and rushed toward the cattle, whose sudden and unexpected appearance had cut them off from the timber, sending forth a volley of rifle-like reports from her stock-whip as the lash swiftly circled above her head.

Lucille Debonay immediately imitated her actions, both reserving their pistols for hotter and closer work, should that audacious charge fail in producing the desired effect.

A wilder, more peculiarly thrilling scene could scarcely have been imagined.

Ranged in a line as true as though drawn up on parade, pawing up the dust and casting it high above their backs, shaking their lowered heads until their long horns clashed against each other, then uplifting their long, thin necks and staring at the girls as they came on, greeting them with loud sniffs of angry curiosity.

Still closer, and the line remained unbroken, but the two girls knew that to falter now would be surely fatal, and without a pause they dashed on until their long lashes could reach the cattle. Straight into their faces sped the steel-like crackers, cutting away the curling hair and drawing blood wherever they touched. Sharply rung out the voices of the two brave women, and just as they were beginning to despair of success, the cattle broke and separated, those immediately in front falling back, while the others left the line to form an irregular circle, the center of which was the maidens.

Lower sunk their hearts, for they saw that another such victory would be fully equivalent to defeat. Their only hope lay in reaching the timber. To do this, they must break or drive back the cattle immediately in front; but they also knew that those threatening horns behind would come closer and closer as they seemed to retreat, until a sudden rush should end all. Once knocked down beneath those clattering hoofs, the struggle would be brief.

"We must break them!" cried Lucille, her eyes aglow, twin red spots coming into her cheeks. "Shoot, Ora, and make your lead count! It's for life or death now!"

So close that the flame-tinged smoke almost scorched the curling frontlets, flashed the revolvers in swift succession.

One of the cows dropped to its knees without a sound, rolling over on its side, its brain-bullet pierced. Another uttered a wild bellow of agony, shaking its head frantically as it plunged forward, blood streaming from an eye-socket, seeing nothing of the women in front, but barely missing Ora with its swinging horns as she leaped quickly aside.

Her foot alighted upon a pebble, her ankle turned beneath her weight, and with a cry of mingled pain and despair, she fell at full length to the ground.

It was a doubly unfortunate mishap, occurring

just then, for the line of cattle was broken by the pistol-shots, and a swift dash might easily have carried them to the friendly cover. Lucille had started to take advantage of the opening, when that cry checked her. Without the slightest hesitation she turned and stood above her helpless friend, showing a degree of courage that would have done honor to the boldest man, for none knew better than she what peril she was thus incurring.

"Go, Lu! save yourself!" gasped Ora, sinking back again as she vainly endeavored to regain her footing. "My ankle is broken! Save yourself!"

Her failing voice was drowned by the swift reports of Lucille's revolver as one of the cattle made a dash forward, with long horns lowered for tossing the prostrate figure. An angry bellow of pain, and the cow fell back, scattering blood-drops from its ugly frontlet, its companions joining in the fierce routing, yet kept at bay by the shots and the swiftly circling lash.

Then, a joyous cry escaped the lips of the brave woman, as she saw a horseman riding toward them at breakneck speed, yelling at the top of his voice, discharging shot after shot in swift succession from his heavy revolvers, even at that distance making each bullet count.

None too soon was his coming, Lucille's over-taxed nerves were giving way, and she sunk to her knees as the mad rider burst into the little circle, using his long-lashed whip with terrible effect.

A savage wrench on the curb checked his horse, and as though hurled from the saddle by the sudden stoppage, the man reached the ground, his left arm clasp Lucille to his side, and then, despite her broken protest that he should first save Ora, lifting her into the vacated saddle as though she had been no more weight than an infant. An equally swift motion placed Ora behind her, and then the young man cried:

"Take to the timber—quick!"

"With you—not without!"

Impulsively the words broke from the lips of the proud *brune*, and the bronzed cheek of the young man flushed hotly, a joyous light flashed into his blue eyes as he met her gaze.

Her eyes sunk, her cheeks flushed, but she tightened the reins and held the snorting horse in check. She knew the interpretation which he placed upon her words, but she cared not then. The excitement was still too intense. His coming had saved them from almost certain death. Why should she conceal her gratitude?

Fortunately the young man did not wholly lose his head, and pausing only to rain a shower of blows upon the cattle still within reach of his long lash, he grasped the flowing mane of the horse and dashed toward the timber, glancing over his shoulder as he ran.

The cattle seemed demoralized for the time being, though the bull and his mates were running toward the spot, and the doubly weighted horse reached the *motte* without being pursued.

"Thank Heaven! you are safe, ladies!" panted the young man, checking the horse beneath a wide-spreading tree whose branches hung low.

"And under Heaven, you, Mr. Abbey!" murmured Lucille, now that the worst was past, turning pale as death, and trembling in the saddle as though about to fall.

What answer he might have made, can only be conjectured, for a furious lowing and bellowing outside told him that all peril was not yet past, and through the fringe of bushes, he could see the cattle gathered around the last slain cow, pawing up the dust, horns clashing, tails elevated and switching angrily, as they scented the blood.

Grasping a limb, he swung himself up into the tree, then bent low, and winding an arm around Lucille's waist, lifted her up beside him.

"Cling fast! Tie your belt around that limb. Those brutes may take a notion to follow—they're coming now!"

Swift as thought he raised Ora from the saddle into which she had slipped, then dropped upon his horse, and with a parting warning to them, turned his horse and dashed out of the *motte*, filling the empty chambers of his pistol with fresh cartridges as he did so.

With the routing bull at their head, the cattle flocked together in a close clump, their onset checked as they caught sight of the horseman. Straight at them he rode, a stream of fire pouring from the extended weapon, the heavy balls dropping cow after cow in their tracks. And then, when the watching maidens trembled with fear as it seemed to them that he intended plunging directly into their midst, a touch of the rein caused the well-trained horse to leap aside, and the long whiplash hissed through the air, cracking loudly, spitefully, gashing through skin and flesh, laying the bone bare wherever the cracker struck.

Ten seconds of this hot work, and then the cows broke and fled with lowings of terrified dismay, leaving the well-nigh blinded bull alone to face the enemy.

Its frontlet and neck gashed with the whip, bleeding also from more than one bullet-wound,

the bull never gave a sign of retreating. Shaking its long horns—very different from the short, thick, clumsy-looking weapons carried by his more civilized cousins—it made a vicious dash, only to be foiled by the active horse which instantly obeyed the slightest order of its gallant rider, though the rein lay untouched upon its neck, and a pressure of the young man's knees alone guiding it.

Swifter far than the human eye could follow its movements, circled the snake-like lash, a little cloud of severed hair and spray of blood following each report, the young man laughing with an almost savage glee as he foiled the furious rushes of the nearly blinded animal.

Perhaps it was because he felt that kindly eyes were watching his movements, that he showed no very great haste to finish his work. Perhaps he knew that in no situation does a man more plainly exhibit his qualities than in the saddle, especially in a duel like this, where poor horsemanship or clumsiness would almost surely end in defeat, if not worse.

A man from crown to sole, was Genteel Guy Abbey, foreman of all the Debonay estate. Not tall; barely above middle height and by no means heavily built, his figure was graceful and athletic, his muscles like tempered steel, and placed just where they would prove of the most service. Never quarrelsome, he had nevertheless more than one victory over much bigger men to his credit, unmarred by a single defeat as yet.

Quiet, polite in manner and speech, he had been given the name of Genteel Guy soon after taking charge of the ranch, but since then more than one rough cowboy declared that a sad misnomer—Chain lightning would suit him far better.

His light blonde hair was worn close cut. Only a pair of mustaches adorned his face, and they were kept neatly trimmed. His garb was suited to the position he held; stout, plain and serviceable. He wore no jewelry. In the belt which encircled his waist were knife and a brace of revolvers. At his saddle-bow hung a coiled lasso. In his hand the terrible whip.

Genteel Guy was very young for the responsible position which he now held; under thirty. Yet it was common report that in all New Mexico there was not a better managed, not a more profitably conducted ranch than that belonging to Pierre Debonay. And whenever the occasion arose, the ranchero freely gave all the credit to his foreman.

Once more avoiding the mad rush of the bull, Genteel Guy reined in his horse, and calmly awaited the next onset, with a dexterous movement of the wrist, sending the long lash out behind him until it rested at full length on the plain.

Turning from its baffled charge, the bull, bleeding freely and dropping bloody foam from its nostrils, steadied itself for a moment, glaring at its nimble antagonist, then set its sharp horns and plunged forward with a sullen bellow.

A faint cry escaped the lips of Lucille as she breathlessly watched the action, for it seemed as though Genteel Guy intended to sacrifice himself, so motionless did he sit his horse, but a little laugh came from Ora.

"Never fear, pet. He knows what he is doing. See! didn't I tell you so? Did you ever see a neater bit of work?"

A slight movement of that steel-like wrist, and the snake-like lash rolled over the ground, through the air, past the horseman, straightening out as it neared the oncoming bull, emitting a report sharp and clear as that of a rifle. Swift as thought the wrist turned backward, the lash following, then shot forward again almost ere the cracker came to the side of the horseman. Another crack that was blended with the mad routing of the bull, and a mocking laugh broke from the young man, who knew that neither eye nor arm had failed him.

Mingled blood and aqueous humor trickled from the severed eye-sockets, for the bull had been blinded by those two dexterous strokes.

Thoroughly cowed, the animal turned and fled in utter confusion, and with a word to his horse, Genteel Guy followed, ranging alongside, bending forward with knife in his hand.

One deftly delivered stroke, and the bull plunged forward upon its head, the spinal cord divided.

Reining in his horse, Genteel Guy turned toward the motte and waved his hand, then made a gesture toward the runaway horse with his lasso.

He knew how proud spirited Lucille was, and though that hasty-passionate speech had greatly encouraged him, he felt that it would be best for him to give her a little time to recover her composure before he rejoined her.

More than a mile away, he could see the horse which had escaped from Ora Ainsley, uneasily grazing, frequently lifting its head to look around in search of the wild cattle, and he rode briskly toward the animal, uncoiling his tangled lasso and making it ready for use.

The capture was not to be so easily made, for the creature was not yet thoroughly recovered from its alarm, and for a time eluded the horseman, but at length he came within proper casting distance, and the noose settled around the

animal's neck. The instant it felt the touch of the choking rope, the runaway stood quiet, knowing from past experience that to struggle against it would only increase its punishment, and Genteel Guy was riding toward it, when he was startled by the rapid report of firearms, coming from the direction of the timber island where he had left the two women.

Dropping the slack of the lasso, he turned, to behold several tiny puffs of smoke rising above the bushes at the exact point where he had parted from the maidens.

Forgetful of all else, he plunged his spurs deeply into the flanks of his horse, dashing swiftly back, only to feel a tremendous shock and be almost cast from the saddle as his steed fell to its knees, while the runaway horse was cast to the ground by the pluck of the lasso.

With a grating curse, Genteel Guy drew his knife and cut the lasso, then dashed on, fearing the worst for his love.

CHAPTER IV.

RECOGNITION TOO LATE.

WITH a breathless interest which she did not seek to disguise in the least, Lucille Debonay leaned forward from her perch in the tree to watch the movements of Genteel Guy. Not an action of either horse or rider escaped her, and in each motion of the young man's lithe, graceful form she could see some fresh charm. If naught else resulted from that day's wild freak, it had torn the scales forever from her eyes, showing her that this dashing rider was dearer to her than all else on earth.

Never until now had she acknowledged this, even in her own heart. He had not spoken, save with his eyes, and then only briefly, indistinctly. At times she almost hated him for his modesty in fearing to speak out boldly. What if he was poor, while she was the heiress of Pierre Debonay? Would not love make them equal? Love? Bah! It was hatred, contempt, which she felt for him, for herself!

That feverish indecision was past now. She knew that she did love Guy Abbey, and for the moment she felt to the full as certain that he loved her in return.

She could still see the pale, scared look upon his handsome face as he came thundering down to the rescue, and she felt a peculiar thrill of joy as she knew it was brought there by her peril, not that of Ora. It was her whom he first assisted. Her at whom he looked. She alone who felt that close, quivering, passionate clasp of the strong arm; instinct alone told her this.

And she? What had she said? The words came back to her, and she recalled the look with which she had rewarded him.

A hot flush of maidenly shame came into her face, and for the moment forgetting where she was, Lucille bowed her head, covering her face with her hands, murmuring:

"He could not misunderstand—he knows all now, and—"

"If he don't, I shall take particular pains to enlighten the stupid fellow!" laughed Ora, her voice startling Lucille so that she almost fell from her perch.

Ora laughed anew as Lucille gazed at her with a confused and doubting air, unconscious that she had uttered her words aloud, and settling her dainty little form in a more comfortable position, she added:

"I mean just what I say, Lu. He's just splendid! He looked big and mighty as a mountain when he came dashing up to us, and scattered those cows as though they were nothing more dangerous than rabbits. I could throw myself at his feet and worship him—if grim old Mark hadn't a prior claim!"

"Nonsense, child—"

"Precisely what I've thought, time and again, when watching you raise the poor fellow into the seventh heaven of delight, by a smile, a few soft words, only to cast him down to—the other place—the next instant, by some exhibition of your abominable pride."

"You can scowl and arch your eyebrows, my dear. I'm not afraid of you, if that silly fellow is. I know you wouldn't strike a cripple—ouch!"

A grimace of pain accompanied the exclamation, and Lucille moved a little nearer, anxious sympathy in her eyes.

"Your poor ankle! I forgot!"

"So did I," laughing faintly. "It hurts most abominably, but I reckon it's no more than a sprain."

"Received for my sake—you darling!" and at the risk of both falling from their precarious perch, Lucille took Ora in her arms and hugged her fervently.

"I led you into the scrape; you hug and kiss me. Genteel Guy got us both out of it; I wonder what will be his reward?" muttered Ora, with mock solemnity.

Flushing hotly, Lucille drew back and looked out upon the plain, where Guy Abbey was just blinding the bull. Ora also watched the exciting scene, but that did not still her tongue.

"It's a shame that you've kept him at arm's-length so long, Lu, and I feel as though I was about as guilty. A nobler, handsomer gentleman never drew the breath of life. He fairly

worships the ground you tread upon. He looks upon you as an angel, too good for mortal food. Some day he will blow out his brains, when you have driven him to utter despair with your icy looks—or *would*, if I permitted. But I won't! I'll open his eyes to the truth before yonder sun sets. I'll tell him that you worship him—that he has only to stick—"

"Stop, child!" cried Lucille, her eyes flashing, her face as pale as that of a corpse, her voice hoarse and unnatural. "If you dare—I'll bury this knife in my heart before I'll meet his gaze, if you dare betray me!"

She saw Genteel Guy deal the death-blow to the bull, then turn toward the motte and wave his hand. She seemed to fear that he would read the shameful truth in her face, even at that distance, and averting her head, she dropped to the earth, pacing slowly back and forth, struggling to subdue her powerful emotions ere the young man should return.

Ora watched her friend with no little solicitude, tinged though it was with a modicum of malicious pleasure, perfectly natural in an engaged young lady, who has often been lectured on the folly of allowing her heart to overrule her head. She was baving her revenge, now, and that is sweet to the best.

A sudden switching of the undergrowth attracted her attention, and a cry of warning escaped her lips as she beheld a trim deer-like head amidst the foliage, twin eyes of a peculiar reddish black staring out upon the unsuspecting maiden; but it was a head that bore long horns of jet and ivory, instead of branching antlers.

"Ran, Lu!" she cried, agitatedly. "A Maverick's coming—"

With a sullen bellow, the dun-colored cow plunged forward through the bushes, straight at the startled maiden, with horns lowered in readiness for tossing, the very picture of devilish fury, for blood was dropping from its gashed nostrils, showing that it had been among those scattered by Genteel Guy.

The charge was so sudden that Lucille had no time to climb the tree, and would have been fatal to a girl of less nerve and promptness of action. As it was, one of the sharp horns tore the skirt of her dress as she darted around the trunk of the tree, almost throwing her down before it gave way.

"Shoot it, Ora!" she cried, as the maddened creature turned nimbly, and started in hot chase as the maiden doubled nimbly about the bole. "Shoot—quick!"

"I can't—my pistol's gone!" gasped Ora, pale and trembling, far more unnerved at the peril which threatened her friend than she would have been for herself in a similar situation.

Round and round the tree ran Lucille, with the cow close at her heels, snorting, routing, its tail switching angrily, its sharp horns scattering flakes of bark from the trunk as it made vicious thrusts at the fleeing maiden.

For nearly a minute, Ora gazed spell-bound upon the scene, trembling so violently that she almost fell from her slender resting-place, for it seemed impossible for Lucille to much longer elude those terrible horns. Then she looked out over the plain, where Genteel Guy was just casting his lasso, and a cry for help broke from her lips.

He did not hear the appeal, but an answer came from another quarter. With encouraging shouts, two horsemen dashed through the undergrowth from the side opposite that on which Genteel Guy was at work, and before the Maverick could fairly realize the altered condition of affairs, a brace of navy revolvers were busily pumping lead into its carcass.

Bellowing savagely, it charged these new foes, but fell in a lifeless heap ere half the intervening distance was covered.

Lucille sunk to the ground, panting, breathless, as she saw that the peril was past, but as the foremost man leaped from the saddle and hastened toward her, she rose to her feet, and with a swift gesture, rejected his proffered aid, though with a smile that robbed the action of its sting.

"I am not hurt, though my gratitude for your services is none the less fervent," she said, earnestly, her lustrous eyes meeting his curious gaze frankly. "A few moments more, and I must have fallen a prey to that ugly brute!"

"Spare your thanks, madam. I am only too glad to have been of service," said the stranger, with a low bow as he doffed his hat, then running his fingers through his long curls, jetty black, save for an occasional thread of silver.

He was almost superbly handsome in both face and form.

Rising six feet in height, straight and erect as ever mortal can be, his figure was a model of athletic strength and grace. His complexion was dark, almost Indian-like. His face was covered by a beard which nearly reached his waist as he stood erect, black as ebony, carefully kept, evidently a source of no little pride on its owner's part. His nose was straight and clean-cut. His eyes rather small, and placed a trifle too close together, but this defect was not noticed after the first glance, they were so brilliant, so eloquent and fascinating.

His garb was that of a traveler from *mora*

civilized regions, better fitted to the States than the desert, of fine material, well and tastefully made. Beneath his coat was a belt of weapons, one of which had done good service.

His companion was equally well-garbed and armed; was of the same dark complexion, but there the resemblance between them ceased.

Slender, almost frail in body, when contrasted with the man beside him, he looked more like a girl masquerading in male habiliments, than a youth just entering manhood, as the delicate mustaches which shaded his upper lip, would indicate.

His eyes were very large and lustrous, and as Ora gazed into them, she involuntarily turned to look into those of her adopted sister, so remarkable was the resemblance. And not alone in that one respect, but in the shape of the face, in each separate feature, the likeness was wonderful. Change their garb, and with a little padding and filling out, this young man might easily have been mistaken for the proud heiress of the Debonay estate.

Almost beside himself with anxiety and fear for his love, Genteel Guy dashed into the *motte*, drawing rein with a gasp of intense relief as he saw Lucille perfectly safe, chatting with the tall stranger, who turned swiftly, one hand seeking a weapon, as he heard the crashing of shrubbery.

Lucille caught his arm with her hand, hastily uttering:

"It is a friend. Mr. Abbey, this gentleman—"

"Fred Bloodgood, at your service," bowed the stranger, as the maiden hesitated. "This is my brother, Kirke."

"To both of whom I owe my life," she earnestly added, with a little shudder, as she glanced toward the dead cow.

"The pleasure of which is a far richer reward than the most ambitious man could ask," quickly replied Bloodgood, bowing low to Lucille, as he stepped forward and extended his hand to Genteel Guy in acknowledgment of the introduction.

The words could not be found fault with, but despite himself, Genteel Guy felt an almost uncontrollable aversion as their hands met. What it was, he could not explain then, but a moment later he gave a start and gazed fixedly into that dark, handsome face, a vague, troublesome memory awakened by the clear-cut profile which was brought to view as Bloodgood turned once more to Lucille Debonay.

"If you more fortunate persons down there, have entirely forgotten the existence of such an humble personage as poor me, allow me to suggest that there are far more comfortable resting-places than an inch-thick limb," called out Ora, with a touch of petulant impatience.

The brothers Bloodgood started in surprise, for until now they had believed Lucille alone, but Genteel Guy, flushing hotly, rode beneath the limb to which the girl clung, and gently took her in his arms.

"Careful—my poor ankle!" gasped Ora, turning pale as a sharp twinge reminded her anew of her mishap.

Lucille assisted her to the ground, saying:

"We must get you back to the house as soon as possible. We can form a litter—"

"I can ride," hastily interposed Ora. "I'm not a cripple, and you shall not make me out one. If I had my horse, now!"

"I will have him here in two minutes, if one of these gentlemen will kindly lend me a lasso. I had to cut mine, when I heard the alarm, over here."

"With pleasure," smiled Bloodgood. "If I only knew how to use it, I'd volunteer to aid you."

"Yet you carry one that has evidently seen good service," pointedly, almost rudely, commented Guy, as he detached the rope from its resting-place.

"I bought it with the horse," was the quiet response. "I supposed it was the fashion, here, but as for using it—" and he shrugged his shoulders, throwing out his hands after a very Frenchy fashion.

"You are a stranger in these parts, then?" asked Guy, lingering, he scarcely could have explained why.

"A greenhorn, a tenderfoot, to use the vernacular," with a laugh. "Yes, I am new to the great West. I believed it a howling wilderness—a land of heathens, and I find it inhabited by angels," with a polite bow that took the edge off of the rather fulsome compliment.

"Yet I could almost swear that I met you not many miles from this very spot, within the past year!" muttered Guy.

"Don't—unless you are partial to perjury," laughed Bloodgood, turning to Lucille once more.

His brow deeply corrugated, an uneasy light in his big blue eyes, Genteel Guy fastened the lasso to his saddle-bow, leaped upon his horse and rode away.

All the joy he had anticipated from meeting with Lucille after that glance, those brief, but eloquent words, was blasted.

She had eyes only for this black Hercules. Her eyes had avoided his, and the foolish fellow

thought she was offended at him for the part he had played in that little drama. That she felt annoyed at having been placed under obligations to him; that she felt ashamed of having appealed to him in her extremity.

He had other cause for thought. This man: he declared himself a stranger in that region, yet Genteel Guy felt positive that this was not their first meeting; that they had met under peculiar circumstances within a year past, not far from that very spot.

If so, and he was an honest man, why had the stranger lied about it?

Fred Bloodgood seemed inclined to treat the matter as a joke, and lightly said to Lucille:

"Mr. Abbey seemed inclined to suspect me of being some terrible criminal in disguise, from his questions. Has he any connections among those dreadful persons of whom we hear so much toward the rising sun—the Vigilantes? If so, perhaps I had better be making tracks. That is the term, I believe?"

Lucille smiled, more at his gestures than his words, but it was only faintly.

"Mr. Abbey is my father's foreman, and if you remain long in these parts, you will understand that it is perfectly natural to look at strangers closely, until they cease to be such."

"Pardon me, I was only jesting. It is a failing of mine, to which I yield too frequently, perhaps, Miss—"

"My name is Debonay," said Lucille, as he paused with a rising inflection that was almost a question.

Bloodgood started, his black eyes glowing.

"Not the daughter of Mr. Pierre Debonay?"

Lucille bowed, gazing at him curiously.

"You hear, Kirke?" cried Bloodgood, turning toward his brother, who was standing beside Ora, engaged in animated conversation. "Where now are your forebodings? Did I not tell you that we would come out all right in the end?"

"It was kind Providence that led us astray," said the young man, bowing first to Lucille, then to Ora. "I was convinced of that, long before I heard the lady's name."

"You see, Miss Debonay," said Bloodgood, turning once more to Lucille, who hardly knew what to make of these sudden changes and speeches of almost oppressive politeness. "We—my brother and I—were on our way to pay a visit to Mr. Pierre Debonay. We carefully heeded the instructions given us for our guidance, but somehow—perhaps because of our verdancy in prairie traveling—we strayed from the right road, and were becoming unpleasantly conscious of that fact, when we caught the distant sound of firearms. Our first impulse—I frankly admit it—was to turn and ride in the other direction!"

"We are not paladins, Kirke and I. Ever since crossing the Missouri, we have been treated with marvelous tales of hostile Indians, of road-agents, of Vigilance Committees and of the gay and festive Rustlers, all of whom were credited with an insatiable appetite for human blood—particularly that of verdant tenderfeet like ourselves."

"But we finally overcame the temptation, and rode toward the sounds, which led us hither. The rest, you know."

He spoke so volubly that Lucille could scarcely follow his meaning, but after a moment, she said:

"You are an old friend of my father, then?"

"Not so," was the quick response. "To the best of my knowledge, we never met. I have a little business with him: yes. For that reason, as well as for having been of a slight service to you, I am overjoyed at this meeting. It would not be so pleasant, lying out on the prairie. Remember, Kirke and I are poor, helpless tenderfeet," with a short laugh.

Despite the fact of her owing him such a debt of gratitude, Lucille felt a strange sensation of growing distrust of this plausibly speaking stranger, and gave a little shiver as she turned to Ora.

A swift flash came into his keen eyes as he noted this, but the bland smile never left his lips as he also joined the others, joining in the gay conversation which was being carried on, broken though it was by an occasional twinge of pain from the injured ankle.

Shortly afterward, Genteel Guy returned with Ora's horse and the side-saddle taken from the dead steed, which he put upon his own animal.

His brow was still stern as he looked at Fred Bloodgood, but he made no remark as he assisted Ora into the saddle, the tall stranger aiding Lucille, and stood in the edge of the timber watching them as they rode slowly away over the plain.

"I've seen him somewhere, and not as an honest man either—but where and when?" he muttered, leaning upon the muzzle of his repeating rifle. "Ha!" he exclaimed, his eyes glowing as he hastily raised the weapon to a level, but lowering it again as Lucille passed between him and Bloodgood, rendering the shot impracticable at that distance.

"I know him now—the dog! He's one of Spitfire Saul's gang of bloody-minded cut-throats!"

CHAPTER V.

"OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY."

A SAVAGE curse hissed through the tight-clinched teeth of Spitfire Saul, when he was forced to burn powder to prevent the escape of Doc Strader, for even as he pulled trigger, he felt that the alarm would prove fatal to his hopes. He knew that a second guard was stationed just without the door, but he likewise knew that either Doc Strader or himself must die, for he saw that the half-stunned, bleeding man, was drawing a revolver even as he tore himself loose from that savage grasp, and rolled swiftly beyond reach of the chained desperado.

One shot, and the deed was done. With a gaping hole in his skull, through which the blood and brains oozed, poor Doc Strader lay before the closed door, quivering convulsively, yet wholly unconscious of pain, so sudden was his death.

The next instant there came a loud thumping on the door, from the outside, and then an excited voice, demanding:

"What's up in thar, Doc? What's the row?"

Bruised and severely wrenched by the heavy fall which he had not attempted to break in the least, so intent was he on striking down his guard, Spitfire Saul drew back and scrambled to his feet with that ominous pounding ringing through his ears like the knell of doom.

He clutched the still-smoking revolver, even in that critical moment feeling a certain grim delight that he held at least five more lives in his hands.

"Doc!" and the sharp pounding on the door was renewed, while the voice without grew more anxious. "What's the row? Durn it, man! can't ye speak? Whoop'er up, or I'll bu'st the door wide open!"

Spitfire Saul glanced from the now motionless corpse to the closed door, and a savage smile curled his red lips.

The heavy door was barred within, and locked from the outside, thus rendering it impossible for either guard alone to open the barrier, without using some such force as that threatened by the outside guard.

Was that for or against him? He could not tell on the spur of the moment, and to gain a brief interval for thought, he hurriedly uttered in the coarse, heavy voice of the dead:

"P'izen cuss was breakin' loose, an' I hed to let him hev it! Wait a bit ontel I kin see ef he's done fer!"

"Open up an' gimme a look!" spluttered the outside guard. "Thar'll be little ole thunder to pay, ef you've wiped him out an' sp'iled the boys' fun! Open up, durn it! Thar's somebody comin' now—they've hearn the shootin'—"

Spitfire Saul hardly heard the excited speech. He had turned and was looking at his manacles, at the chain which held him to the rear wall. Only for that—Ha!

Fearing that his eyesight had deceived him in that dim light, the King of the Rustlers bent forward until his face almost touched the wall, a savage delight flashing from every feature as he saw that he was not deceived—that the huge iron staple was loosened in the wall, half drawn out by the tremendous shock which he had given it in lancing himself upon Doc Strader.

Thrusting the revolver into his bosom, he grasped the double chain near the staple, and threw all his immense power into a single effort, wrestling the staple from its fastenings.

A low, vicious snarl curled his lips as he turned from the wall, thrusting the slack of the chain under and over the iron belt which encircled his waist. Could any one have seen King Saul then, they would have thought him anything but handsome. Instead, he was absolutely hideous. His eyes, his white, pointed teeth, his whole appearance was that of a wild beast, scenting a plentiful feast of blood.

All this passed with the rapidity of thought, and the outside guard was still speaking when King Saul, the chain tucked up out of his way, took the pistol from his bosom, and leaped across the room toward the door.

"He's got it bad, but he ain't killed," he cried, still imitating the voice of the man whom he had slain so remorselessly. "Thar's a-plenty left fer hangin', ef the boys look sharp. Open up an' let me slide. I hed to do it, but the boys may make it hot fer me—"

King Saul never finished the sentence, for there was no need of carrying the deception further. Thoroughly unsuspecting of the terrible truth, the outside guard turned the massive key in the lock, and as Spitfire Saul tore down the heavy bar, the door swung open of its own accord, and the desperate outlaw sprang into the opening, his manacled hands uplifted, grasping the barrel of the heavy revolver, a merciless light flaming in his blue eyes.

A short cry of horrified amazement from the luckless guard, then the pistol fell, driven with all the power of those strong arms. The brass-bound butt was driven clean to the trigger guard into the skull of the unfortunate, the barrel breaking from its fastenings and alone remaining in the hand of King Saul, as the second guard fell in a quivering, ghastly heap at his feet.

"That's what's the matter, you snarling, in—"

quisitive cur!" cried Spitfire Saul, with a short, ferocious laugh, as he rudely spurned the quivering carcass with his foot. "If you travel in a hurry, you can catch up with your comrade, and aid him in telling the devil I sent you—"

For the moment the outlaw had forgotten where he was, the imminent peril with which he was still threatened, all save that frightful, satanic glee with which he was invariably inspired by the sight of freshly flowing blood, when set free by his own hand.

In this respect the wild annals of the great West can show but one parallel—that of Manuel Garcia, the terrible pirate of the California placers, Three-fingered Jack as he was more universally known.

Like him, Spitfire Saul shed blood for the mere pleasure of seeing it flow from the throbbing veins of his helpless victims. Like him, too, he was personally without fear. He never counted the odds when the lust for blood took possession of his brain. Then he was mad, crazed, lapping blood as a hot and thirsty wolf laps water. Yet he, as well as his earlier prototype, could be cool and calculating; steel-nerved in the face of overwhelming danger; swift to see a chance, and equally prompt in taking advantage of it.

Shouts of angry horror from one or two persons whose curiosity had led them within eyesight, attracted by the muffled report of the death-dealing revolver, recalled to him a full sense of the peril which surrounded him, and in an instant clearing away the bloody mist through which he glared down upon his latest victim.

A quick toss of his head cast back the blonde locks of which he was so proud, and as his flaming eyes fell upon the startled citizens, he showed his teeth, and, stooping, snatched a brace of revolvers from the belt of the dead guard.

As he arose again, fully armed, the two men fled around the corner, shouting the alarm that the outlaw had broken bonds and was on the war path.

A hard, mocking laugh broke from King Saul as he distinguished their words, but then he glanced swiftly around him, as though summing up the chances for and against his escape.

The door of a small, low house directly opposite the jail was flung open, and he caught a glimpse of two female faces. As though this sight decided him, he darted forward, and before the door could be closed and fastened, his broad shoulders were pressing it open, almost prostrating the startled women, who vainly strove to bar his entrance.

The eldest, thin, pale and careworn, fell back upon a cot, shivering, hiding her eyes in fear; but the other, young, bright and blooming, boldly confronted the criminal.

Though she said nothing, there was something in her dauntless attitude that amused and interested King Saul, and he showed his teeth in a smile as he addressed her:

"It seems to me that we have met before, my pretty. You are Sheriff Black's daughter?"

"And you are the demon they call Spitfire Saul—"

A shout from the street caused King Saul to glance over his shoulder, and with a light kindling in her black eyes, the girl—for her years were hardly those of a woman—sprung against him with all her strength, striving to snatch the revolver from his manacled hands, and to push him out of the house at the same time. But in neither was she successful, and with an angry oath, King Saul thrust her back, his eyes glowing savagely, his white teeth grating.

With a cry of terror, the pale mother sprung between them, her clasped hands uplifted, only to fall senseless before a brutal stroke of the chain.

"Out of the way, fool!" he growled, viciously, spurning the fallen woman with his foot. "And you, girl; try another of your tricks, and I'll crush that pretty face beneath my heel!"

Stricken with a sudden terror, the poor girl fell upon her knees beside her mother, wiping away the trickling blood with her trembling fingers, shrinking away as his heavy hands rested upon her shoulder.

"Get up, curse you!" he snarled, lifting her to her feet with a single effort, and turning her face so that she could look out upon the street. "Look! that's your father coming. He's heard the news, and he's coming here after his weapons. By all that's holy, I'll send a bullet through his heart, unless you halt him! Speak! tell him that I will murder you, if he dares come one step closer, before I give him permission!"

Thrusting her into the open doorway, King Saul held her trembling figure erect with one hand, while the other hand pressed the muzzle of a revolver against her temple.

The poor girl tried to speak, but only an inarticulate sound came from her throat, and with a savage curse, Spitfire Saul shouted aloud:

"Halt! old man! Come a foot nearer, or try to draw a weapon, and I'll scatter her brains to the winds!"

Sheriff Black heard the words, saw the perilous position of his only child, and with a gasping oath, stopped still, as though suddenly turned to stone.

Spitfire Saul laughed mockingly. He knew the full extent of his peril, knew that the tidings of his escape was spreading through the town like wildfire, but his blood was at boiling heat, and he felt a certain grim delight in the knowledge.

"I've got the dead wood on you this time, Jack Black," he added, more placidly, but still holding the pistol in place. "You caught me foul, once, but I hold no particular grudge against you for that. You took the chances, like a brave man, and I honor you for it. But it's my turn now! Order back those skulking hounds behind you. If they come any nearer, or try any tricks before I'm ready for the music, I'll send this dainty bit of calico over the range by lightning express. You know me for a man of my word, old fellow, when I utter a threat of that sort, so take heed."

With a stifled groan of agony, the sheriff turned and called out to the gathering crowd:

"For the love of Heaven, gentlemen, fall back! He swears that he will murder Lucy if he is pressed too close! Give me time. He cannot escape—"

"Cut that short off, Jack Black!" sharply cried King Saul, with an ugly laugh. "If you swear that I shall not escape, you will be proved an unmitigated liar, sure!"

"Spare her—do not murder the poor child! Shoot me, if you like. I'm a man. If you're one, step out and fight me! But let her go! She's only a child—"

"Quite old enough to serve my purpose," laughed King Saul, recklessly. "You have a pistol in your pocket. Throw it aside—as far as you can send it. Dog!" with a savage snarl as the sheriff hesitated. "Do you want to see this child die? Good enough!" and he laughed mockingly. "Give me a little more time, and I could have you perfectly trained. Stand in your tracks. If you move, or if any of those skulkers try any tricks on travelers—good-by girl!"

It was a peculiar situation. Lucy Black was a favorite with nearly every person in town, and though there were some among those who had been drawn to the spot by the exciting news, bold enough under ordinary circumstances to do battle with even the dreaded Spitfire Saul, they hung back now, knowing full well that the reckless desperado would not hesitate to slay that innocent being, if crowded.

King Saul turned a glance upon the mother, who had recovered her senses, and spoke to her sharply:

"There's a Winchester rifle in the house. Go bring it to me, with the old man's cartridge-belt. Quick!"

The trembling woman arose and left the room for the rear apartment. King Saul kept his eyes roving swiftly from the door to the outside, still with his steel-like grasp upon the shoulder of the girl, still with the pistol-muzzle pressed against her temple, ready to pull the trigger in case of an emergency.

Mrs. Black reappeared, holding the repeating rifle in her hands, and as King Saul cast another swift glance out at the door, she raised the muzzle of the weapon and pulled trigger.

She had not dared to pause for an aim, trusting all to fortune, and the lead whistled harmlessly between her daughter and the outlaw, who jerked his head back with a savage curse.

The next instant he leaped to the side of the desperate woman, wresting the rifle from her hands, with the same motion bringing the barrel around with stunning force against her temple, knocking her senseless to the floor.

Lucy attempted to flee, the moment his grasp left her shoulder, but one catlike leap carried him to her side as she crossed the threshold, and once more she was helpless in his remorseless grip.

At the sound of the shot, Sheriff Black had started forward, but with a groan of mental agony, he paused again as he beheld his idolized child in that crushing gripe.

With a savage laugh, Spitfire Saul crushed Lucy to the ground, holding her beneath one foot, as he turned the muzzle of the repeater upon the father, crying:

"To business, Jack Black! You placed these ornaments on me; you've got to take them off again. Look here!"

As he spoke, King Saul lowered the muzzle of the cocked rifle until it rested directly over the heart of the helpless girl who quivered beneath the brutal pressure of his foot.

"I give you all warning. Though you should send a ten-pound cannon ball through my body, it couldn't hinder my firing one shot. And that shot I'll fire, if you make any bones about obeying me to the very letter, or if any man tries to get the better of me before I bid the band begin to play. It's said and sworn to. You hear me sing?"

"Spare her, and I'll do anything!" hoarsely gasped the wretched sheriff. "But harm one hair of her head, and I'll roast you alive—"

"Go slow, old man," with a warning gleam of his pointed teeth. "Act, not brag or threaten, and you'll live the longer."

"What must I do?" asked Black with desperate calmness.

"First, produce the key that unlocks these cursed irons."

"I haven't got it. It's over at the fort."

Spitfire Saul uttered a savage snarl, but there was something in the tones of the sheriff that told him he spoke the simple truth, and he added:

"Then bring a file—and be quick. Remember what I told you. I may be killed, but she dies with me!"

Pale as death, trembling in every limb so that he could not walk straight, as he reflected on the horrible situation of the young girl whom he loved far more than his own life, the sheriff hurried away, speedily returning with a handful of stout files.

Steadying the rifle which still rested muzzle down over the wildly-beating heart of the poor girl, with one hand, King Saul held out the other for the sheriff to work upon, at the same time repeating the warning against any tricks.

It was superfluous. With that pale, pleading face at his feet, with those imploring eyes looking up into his own, John Black would have fallen upon his face and licked the blood-stained feet of the King of the Rustlers, had he been so bidden. Swiftly and carefully he worked, making no answer to the stinging taunts with which the desperado pelted him.

As one handcuff was severed, King Saul shifted his grasp on the rifle, and extended the other. Then, when both were free, he nodded at his ankles.

"Finish the job while you're at it, my good fellow, and bear in mind that the swifter you work, the sooner your pretty daughter may get up and dust herself."

"You will let her go? You won't kill her when I'm done?" huskily muttered the sheriff, unable longer to repress the horrible doubts which oppressed him like a nightmare.

"Act the gentleman and she's safe enough, so far as I'm concerned," was the careless reply, as his keen eyes roved swiftly and suspiciously around him, on the lookout for the snares which he felt well assured the citizens were quietly forming for his benefit. "She may go—but not until you take a solemn oath to obey my every command without hesitation. Refuse and—well, she'll make a lovely corpse!"

"Spare her and I'll promise anything! But after you're free—when I've kept my promises—then look out!"

"My hand can keep my head, old fellow," with a careless laugh. "I'm open to bet that I'll have your scalp within a week from to-day if you do not resign your office and flee the country."

John Black made no reply to this boasting taunt, but bent to his labors with redoubled energy, not pausing to take a free breath, so eager was he to release his poor child.

At last the irons dropped off, and the sheriff said:

"Now let her go. You are free—"

"Not yet, my good fellow. King Saul is not more than half a king while on foot. There's a likely-looking nag," nodding to where a long-limbed, racing-like sorrel horse was tied to a hitching-post. "Bring him over here. I never care about walking when I can ride just as well as not."

The heavy foot was still pressing upon the poor girl, the rifle muzzle still bore down upon her bosom, and John Black dared not demur nor hesitate. Hastening to the horse, he untied the halter and came back, delivering the animal into the hands of the desperado.

During all this time, while John Black was on his knees plying the files, nearly the entire population of the little town were gazing upon the strange scene, not one among them all daring to lift either voice or hand to interfere. Nor was this altogether because they realized the peril of the sheriff's daughter.

To one and all Spitfire Saul was known, either personally or by reputation. For nearly three years past he had been a terror to that section of New Mexico. At first almost alone he began his career of blood and outrage, but then his force increased in numbers and audacity until the entire country held them in an awe that was only equaled by their hatred and detestation.

King of the Rustlers, he called himself, and like a king of dare-devil cut-throats he conducted himself, now running off a choice lot of cattle and horses, to sell them over the border, quite as frequently bringing back rich plunder from the very corrals which he had just replenished; now stopping a stage or raiding a mining camp; now here, again a few miles away, striking swiftly and surely, all the time leaving tracks of blood behind him.

Literally without personal fear, reveling in dare-devil exploits, never so pleased as when engaged in fighting, a giant in strength, active as a panther, perfect master of all weapons used in the West, a magnificent horseman, during those years he had laughed to scorn all efforts to either kill or capture him, made by the Rangers, the regular troops, and the citizens. A score of times it seemed as though he must be taken, but as often he slipped through the toils, or bloodily cut his way out, to pursue his reckless course with redoubled energy.

At last he was taken, through the treachery

of those whom he trusted most, though the capture was not a bloodless one. Captured only to add another to his marvelous record of still more miraculous escapes.

If the citizens had a leader, it was Sheriff Black, and seeing him submit, none other cared or dared to take the lead. And so it was that all this time Spitfire Saul had remained unmolested; but now, as he leaped into the saddle, and Black lifted his sobbing daughter from the ground, there was an excited bustle among them, which King Saul greeted with a laugh.

Free from his irons, well armed and superbly mounted, he cared little for the demonstration, but swinging the Winchester above his head, he uttered a wild, prolonged yell of taunting defiance, then struck the good horse with his heels and dashed straight at the thickest part of the circle.

The rifle now lay across his thighs, and a revolver was clasped in each hand, the reins hanging loose. And as he dashed forward, twin jets of smoke shot out of the leveled tubes, and with agonized cries, two men reeled, flung aloft their arms and spinning around, fell to the ground, stone dead.

A mocking laugh, then taunting words and stinging epithets burst from the lips of the mandemon as he dashed on, through the scattering crowd, scorning to fire upon those who made no resistance, who thought only of seeking safety in headlong flight. Still on, past the dead men, then drawing rein and wheeling in the saddle when fairly clear of the town.

Up came the rifle, out poured the stream of lead, dealing death or stinging wounds. Then, with one more taunting laugh, Spitfire Saul dashed away over the sand-hills, a free man.

CHAPTER VI.

A COOL CUSTOMER.

PERHAPS it was because he fancied there might come another attack from the scattered Mavericks, but while the gay little cavalcade rode briskly away from the timber island, Fred Bloodgood cast many a keen glance around them, one of which chanced to light upon Genteel Guy just as that worthy impulsively leveled his rifle in that direction.

A slight twitching of the long mustaches as the thin lips beneath them pressed more firmly together, a swiftly-born and quick-vanishing glint of fire in those piercing orbs, were all that indicated the discovery he had made, and those changes were so slight, so speedily disguised, that not another one of the party even suspected that ought was going wrong.

They were riding quite rapidly, for the gait of her horse was so smooth and even that Ora Ainsley found her ankle gave her less pain when cantering than while holding her spirited steed down to a walk, as he fretted less.

She and Kirke Bloodgood were riding together, a little to the rear of the other couple, and it was in falling back to ask how she was bearing the ride, that Lucille Debonay interposed her form between that of Fred Bloodgood and the leveled rifle of Genteel Guy.

Even had she not done this, it may well be doubted whether the young foreman would have risked a shot, though the superb weapon he bore was good for a longer range than the half-mile which separated them.

While Lucille was conversing with Ora, Bloodgood cast a comprehensive glance before them, taking in the lay of the ground, and mentally comparing it with that which they had passed over since leaving the timber island. A short, almost imperceptible nod told that he had formed his decision, and when, a few moments later, Lucille touched up her horse to take her former position, Bloodgood abruptly drew rein, with a little exclamation of annoyance.

"Kirke, you haven't—of course not! Ladies, I fear I must deny myself the pleasure of riding further with you just now. I find that I have lost a package—among other valuables, the letters introducing us to Mr. Debonay. I had it just before reaching the grove. It must have fallen from my pocket while there, or on the way to this spot."

Lucille hesitated a moment, with a swift glance toward Ora, then said:

"We can wait here, or I will ride back with you—"

"Do neither, I beg of you!" quickly uttered Bloodgood, with far more earnestness than the occasion seemed to demand. "It would be cruel to keep Miss Ainsley in pain longer than is absolutely necessary. I beg of you, ride on to the ranch, and borrow no trouble on my account."

"But you are a stranger in these parts. You may be unable to find your way back."

"You forget Mr. Abbey," with a short laugh. "I will hail him, and beg his services, not only to aid me in recovering my property, but to guide me to the ranch. Indeed, I am almost pleased that I have so good an excuse, for my conscience has been pricking me most unpleasantly, for leaving the gentleman alone and afoot."

Though she could not have explained it, even to herself, there was something in this speech

that caused Lucille to drop her eyes and avert her head to conceal the hot flush with which her countenance was suffused.

"To your care I confide the ladies, brother," added Fred Bloodgood, with a playful smile. "Should danger threaten by the way, forget that you are a tenderfoot, and perform your *devoir* gallantly, under penalty of never more calling me brother! Escort them safely home, but do not enter into business until I return."

Doffing his hat, he bowed low as the trio passed on, then wheeled his horse and rode swiftly along the back trail. Not for many rods, however.

Just before the separation, they had crossed a gentle slope which shut off all view of the timber island. Bloodgood rode back until he crossed this natural divide, then drew rein and dismounted, apparently busying himself about the saddle-girths, but in reality taking in the situation with swift, earnest glances.

Kirke Bloodgood and the two girls were riding away from the spot where he had parted with them, at a brisk canter, and had they turned their heads for a backward glance, they could barely have distinguished his head amidst the gentle waving grass with which the crest of the long slope was crowned.

In the opposite direction Fred Bloodgood could see the timber island, and a few rods nearer, the lithe form of Genteel Guy, rapidly following along the trail.

A dangerous light filled the black eyes as their owner saw this, and though no sound escaped his lips, that vicious glitter clearly expressed the thoughts which flashed through his busy brain.

"Curse the fellow! who thought he possessed such a memory? Never met but that once, and then I was without a disguise. I couldn't recognize myself, at first glance, in the glass, with this mop of hair covering my head and face," and his long fingers twitched at the glossy beard over his breast.

"He suspected the truth *then*—he *more* than suspects, *now*; else why was he drawing bead on me a bit ago? So much the worse for him!" and the red light deepened in his eyes. "I've dealt the cards to win a big stake in this game, and if he thinks to chip in, I'll freeze him out without a sight for his money, or I know nothing of gambler's bluff!"

A second glance assured him that Kirke and the two girls were riding steadily on toward the distant ranch, and then, as though the defect had been remedied, Fred Bloodgood remounted his horse, and slowly rode down the slope, timing his progress so as to meet Genteel Guy in the level low-land at the base.

When first sighted, Genteel Guy was running swiftly along the trail, carrying his rifle at a trail, but as he caught sight of the main object of his suspicions alone his pace slackened, and his rifle rose until it rested across his left arm, his right hand covering the trigger guard.

Firmly believing that his startling suspicions were well founded, the young foreman was on his guard against treachery, though he had time before the meeting to school his voice and features so that neither should betray him too soon.

As Bloodgood halted, he drew a handkerchief from his breast-pocket, and waved it toward Genteel Guy, glibly lying as the young man came within easy range of his voice:

"Are you bound for the ranch, Mr. Abbey?" "Did you take the trouble to ride back this far, just to ask that question?" retorted Guy, with a slight sneer.

"Not altogether," laughing lightly. "I lost a note-book out of my pocket, and rode back to find it. I stumbled over it just back there, and seeing you coming this way, concluded to wait for you, as the ladies, owing to the pain which Miss Ainsley was suffering, rode on without me."

"You are very kind and considerate, Mr.—What did you call yourself, pray?"

"Bloodgood—Fred Bloodgood. But you give me too much credit. The honest truth is, I'm not over fond of fast riding; hardly saddle-wise, as the saying is. Neither am I an adept at following a trail. And between the two failings, I began to doubt whether I would be able to reach the Debonay ranch this evening, after all. Now if you can guide me—"

"I'll keep an eye on you, never fear," interposed Genteel Guy, just a little contradicting his title by the sharp manner in which he emphasized his words with a nod of the head.

Bloodgood laughed softly as he turned his horse's head.

"Luckily my conscience is wholly at ease, or that speech might easily be given a meaning just the opposite to that which I know you intend to convey. I can imagine how uncomfortable that keen eye might make a criminal feel—"

Genteel Guy flung out one hand impatiently.

"We are wasting time which might be better employed, if you are as anxious to reach the ranch as you would have me infer. I begin to fear, too, that the ladies have not left all the danger of to-day behind them."

Bloodgood glanced swiftly into his face from beneath his heavy eyebrows, and his huge mus-

taches curled a trifle as he noticed how stern set was the handsome face of the foreman, how brightly burned the resolute fire in his blue eyes. He saw that Genteel Guy more than doubted him, caring little whether those suspicions were rightly interpreted or not.

"As a stranger in the land, I can hardly be expected to be as well posted as a native, but where I came from, if we had any occasion to think a lady threatened by peril of any sort, we lost no time in speeding to her aid. But you—"

"Have studied prairie politeness too long and thoroughly to even dream of taking precedence of a stranger," cut in Guy, with an exaggerated imitation of the other's courtesy, bowing low, but quickly recovering his erect attitude, still keeping the stranger covered with the muzzle of his rifle as it lay across his left arm, though without appearing to mean any especial suspicion by so doing.

The black eyes glittered, but after a hesitation so brief that it could scarcely be called such, Bloodgood touched his horse with the spur and rode a little in advance, neither man making further remark until the crest of the long slope was gained.

A quick breath of relief broke from the younger man as his eager gaze swept the ground beyond them, just catching a glimpse of the two maidens and Kirke Bloodgood as they disappeared over the next crest, nearly a mile away.

"Thank Heaven! they're still safe, and riding straight for the ranch!" he muttered, unconsciously breathing the words just loud enough for his keen-eared companion to catch their meaning.

"Since they started with that express intention, and as Miss Ainsley must be suffering considerable pain from her sprained ankle, I fail to see why that fact should so greatly surprise you," commented Bloodgood, laughing softly as Genteel Guy gave a little start of surprise.

But he quickly recovered himself, and quietly said:

"I'll take great pleasure in explaining all that when we arrive at the ranch—if you still desire to go there."

"If?" echoed Bloodgood, lifting his eyebrows. My dear sir, you choose very queer expressions, somehow. I have traveled over a thousand miles, with no other object on earth than to have a business interview with the owner of the Debonay ranch, if he proves to be the gentleman of that name whom I confidently hope to meet. I believe I said something like this before, though you appear to have forgotten it."

"Possibly because my memory is growing treacherous of late," retorted Guy, with a grim smile, as he gazed keenly into the face of the horseman. "You remember that I had a fancy you and I had met before, I could not recall the man's name nor his character, try hard as I might. You will feel tempted to laugh, when I tell you how wide of the mark I shot."

"In other words?" asked Bloodgood, stifling a yawn with one hand, as he glanced carelessly toward the point where the trio of riders had vanished from view.

"Of course you never heard of a gentleman whose *'moniker'* is Windy Jess?"

Bloodgood stared at the speaker with wide-open eyes.

"His *what*? I really am ashamed, but my knowledge of zoology is lamentably deficient. Do you allude to an organ-grinder? Do gentlemen of this region amuse themselves with that wonderful instrument, and carry their monkeys too, giving them pet names? But why Windy Jess?"

Genteel Guy watched the speaker keenly, and for the first time since he raised his rifle at the timber island, he began to doubt the truth of the belief which had then flashed across his brain. There was nothing of confusion or anger in the bearded face. The brilliant eyes met his searching gaze with open frankness. There could be detected only a languid surprise, mingling with a feeble curiosity.

"*Moniker*, not monkey, my dear sir. A bit of argot, or rogues' jargon, meaning name or title, and in this case that of a rather celebrated character up in Socorro County: Jesse Paran, Windy Jess, from his linguistic propensities, probably, and one of the right-hand men of Spitfire Saul, the self-styled King of the Rustlers, or cattle-thieves and light-fingered gentry in general."

"And you mistook me for that gentleman? Many thanks, my dear sir, for the compliment!" laughed Bloodgood.

"The best of us are liable to make mistakes, you know, and I do not claim to be infallible. At first I doubted, then I could have taken an oath that you *were* the man."

"And now?"

"Shall I answer you frankly?"

"Certainly!" with an uplifting of his eyebrows.

"Very well. I do not know just what to believe. Something tells me you are playing a cunning part, for no good purpose; that you are the rascal I believed; but then, again, I cannot feel sure, since you say you are going to the Debonay ranch. If you really are Windy Jess, you must know that there are men on the place who would be almost certain to recognize

you—men who have sworn to hang you like a dog, if ever you cross their path again!"

Bloodgood laughed shortly, almost mockingly as he said:

"I may be running a risk, but only if your friends hang before questioning. That risk I must incur, as my business with Mr. Debonay is of too great importance for me to turn back now. Always supposing that he is the gentleman whom I am led to believe. You may be able to solve those doubts."

"And if you discover you have made a mistake, you will retrace your steps without an interview, of course?"

"Not at all," was the quick response. "You forget that my brother has gone on ahead. Besides, were I to attempt a retreat, your suspicions would be restored."

"And I would take you to the ranch, whether or no," was the frank addition.

"Exactly. But pardon me; will you not ride away?"

"Thanks; I am very well pleased, as it is."

"But I am not," laughed Bloodgood, alighting rather gingerly, turning the horse loose to follow of its own accord. "As I hinted, I am anything but a saddle expert, and I could cheerfully witness a monstrous barbecue of all the horses in the land, topped off with saddles for trimmings! I'll not be able to sit down in comfort for a month to come!"

"While Windy Jess was a perfect centaur," with a keen side-glance. "I never met his superior for reckless, skillful horsemanship."

"The memory of that worthy seems to haunt you to-day," and as he spoke, there came into his eyes a look of curiosity. "Thereby hangs a tale, of course. Have you any objections to spin it, as we walk on to the ranch?"

"When we reach our destination, perhaps; not now," gravely. "Few men are fond of telling how they have been worsted, and I am one of the majority."

Bloodgood made no immediate observation, and for a few moments the twain walked leisurely down the slope, the horse quietly following at a few paces in the rear, bending its head for an occasional mouthful of grass.

"I understood Miss Debonay to say that you were foreman, or general manager of the estate. Am I right?"

"I overlook the out-door matters, yes; but always under the advice and instructions of the owner."

"Then you can doubtless tell me enough about him to set at rest all doubts as to whether or no he is the gentleman whom I have traveled so far to meet. Will you kindly do so?"

"If I can, without betraying any confidences—certainly."

"The name is the same; Pierre Debonay. The gentleman I expect to find, is a Southerner."

"Mr. Debonay came from Georgia, I believe."

"From near the old Cherokee district?" eagerly.

"That I cannot say. He never told me, and I had no occasion to question him. Doubtless he will tell you, if you ask."

"Look here, Mr. Abbey," and there was an entire change in the tones of the speaker, though still polite enough. "Do you know, I have been puzzling my brain over one point, until I can stand it no longer. I like you—from the first glance when we met, back yonder, I took a strong fancy to your face and manner of speech; but—"

"A thousand thanks, as far as you have gone," retorted Guy, with a short, careless laugh. "Pray continue. But—what?"

"I chanced to glance back as we reached the crest of the ridge, over yonder, and I saw—or was it fancy—you raise your rifle, as though meaning to take a shot at one of us. Of course it could not have been at either of the ladies. That leaves only my brother and myself. At which one was you aiming? And why did you not fire?"

"A plain question deserves a plain answer, and here you have it. At you! If Miss Debonay had not passed between us, I should have risked the shot, though a long one."

"Thanks for your frankness," with a mocking bow. "Pray add to the obligation by explaining why and wherefore?"

"I have already told you, but if the words are pleasing, I am willing to repeat them; because at that moment I remembered whom you reminded me of. I felt positive you were none other than that audacious scoundrel, Windy Jess. I had sworn to kill or capture him, if we ever met again."

"Was that your only reason?" with a slight smile.

"Was it not enough? You were riding away with two ladies, either and both of whom I am in duty bound to protect with my life, if needs be. I know that you—or, I should say, Windy Jess, had sworn to have revenge on Pierre Debonay. I believed you would try to abduct his daughters, as the surest method of wringing his heart-strings. I was too far off to foil you in any other manner. Is that sufficiently plain?"

"Quite; and much more satisfactory than I anticipated."

"It is your turn to explain," slowly uttered Guy.

"Having no suspicion of your thinking me this wonderful Windy Jess—as how should I?—I believed you were actuated by jealousy. Nay, my dear sir," with a careless wave of the hand, as Genteel Guy flushed hotly and half-raised his hand. "I heard you through, without interruption, though your suspicions were anything but complimentary to me, as an honest man. It is no more than fair for you to hear me. I put it to you as a gentleman."

Genteel Guy nodded, not caring to trust his voice, just then. Bloodgood seemed satisfied, and resumed, his voice softer, more even than before.

"You are young, handsome, graceful; Miss Debonay is even more so, as is but proper. Isolated as you both must be, from other society—leaving out the Windy Jess element, of course—what more natural than that you two should fall in love with each other?"

"In what does this concern you?"

"Very nearly, as you will be ready to admit if you will kindly listen to me a little longer."

"Go on!" muttered Guy, with an ominous glitter in his blue eyes as he added: "But guard your speech when you allude to Miss Debonay. I give you this warning, as from one man to another, and you will be wise if you keep it well in mind."

"Which savors strongly of a threat; but never mind. I ask you a blunt question: Are you and Miss Debonay engaged?"

"No," tersely replied Genteel Guy.

"Good enough!" exclaimed Bloodgood, quickly adding as the young foreman flashed a hot glance into his face: "Allow me to explain. I took a prodigious fancy to Miss Debonay, the first moment I beheld her charming countenance. As you see, I am getting along in years, and at my age, if ever, a man should begin to think seriously of settling down to home comforts. True, this reflection is of recent date—scarce an hour old—but it is none the less strong, none the less a wise one, which I firmly intend to carry out."

"When I saw you with rifle leveled at me, the thought struck me that perhaps you had a prior claim on the affections of the young lady, and for that reason I invented an excuse for riding back to meet you, and solve those doubts."

"You frankly admit that you have no positive claims, and now I give you fair warning that I mean to enter the lists of love, and to win the lady, if it lies in my power."

"You have said enough, sir," uttered Genteel Guy, his face stern and hard-set. "I have let you run to the end of your rope, though it was hard work, believing as I now firmly do, that you are a scoundrel of the first water, even if you are not Windy Jess, as I first thought."

"You do not mince your words, Mr. Abbey!"

"Why should I? You have not been mealy-mouthed. You have openly boasted of what you intended doing; you can hardly fault me for doing the same, for then we will meet evenly."

"If you are the man I believe, that beard and hair forms a most cunning disguise, and are both false, for you have not had time to grow them since I saw you last. You will bear me company to the ranch. If you prefer to keep the matter secret, until the question is fairly settled, I will take you to my own room, and there make the investigation. If I am wrong, I'll beg your pardon. If right, I'll hang you like a dog!"

"Suppose I decline to accompany you on those terms?"

Quick as thought the rifle was cocked and covering him.

"You will go, dead or alive! Take your choice!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOTTERY OF LIFE OR DEATH.

FOR a brief space the two men confronted each other, neither moving, neither speaking, the one holding his leveled rifle steady as the extended finger of fate, the other staring into those sternly blazing blue eyes, his own orbs glowing with a dangerous fire.

Though the muzzle of the weapon was barely beyond the sweep of his strong right arm, had he made an attempt to dash it aside, Fred Bloodgood showed rare nerve for a man whose very life hung on the faint pressure of another's finger.

Not a muscle quivered, not the slightest symptom of fear could those blazing eyes detect, and it was with a far higher opinion of him than ever before, that Genteel Guy spoke:

"Pledge me your word that you will make no attempt to escape before we reach the ranch, and I'll drop my gun."

A short, hard, ugly laugh parted the man's lips.

"I may be a tenderfoot, and therefore considered fair game for desperadoes of your caliber, but there's one thing you can't do; make me beg!"

"A sweet-scented tenderfoot, you are!" sneered Abbey.

"Tenderfoot or tough, I am a man, if you can comprehend what that term means. If not,

put down your gun and meet me on more equal footing, and I'll take pleasure in teaching you!"

A hot, angry flush crossed the young man's cheek.

"I listened to an appeal like that from Windy Jess, once before, and the slippery rascal got the best of me by one of his devilish tricks. I don't care to run the same risk now."

Fred Bloodgood flung out one hand with an impatient gesture, and there was a trace of anger in his tones:

"Why don't you shoot, then? This is the second time you have had me covered within the hour. The first time, the distance was too great, and a fair woman came between us. Neither is the case now. I am not beyond range. Miss Debonay is not here to spoil sport. Shoot—or own up that you are too cowardly to strike at the heart of a man, even though he stands before you with empty hands!"

For a few fleeting instants, the life of the bold speaker hung upon a thread, frail as a filament of gossamer, and this he saw, plainly as though the doom had been written out in letters of fire by the finger of fate. But he flinched not. He stood before that frowning muzzle, his massive chest squared, his eyes filled with stern defiance, while a sneering smile curled his long mustaches.

Taken alone, his words sounded like boasting. Taken in connection with his attitude and bearing, and they were the defiance of a man who knew no fear, though the odds were frightfully against him.

The brief temptation overcome, Genteel Guy stepped aside a pace and lowered his rifle, dropping the barrel into the hollow of his left arm, and still keeping it at full cock.

"I don't want to shoot you, if I can possibly get around it," he said slowly. "But all the same, you've got to go on with me to the ranch, alive or as a corpse—that's settled!"

Fred Bloodgood laughed softly, as he took a cigar case from his pocket and bit the end off of a weed, then striking a match, speaking slowly, as he sheltered the tiny flame from the gentle breeze:

"My dear sir, if you only knew it, you are wasting a great deal of energy, to say nothing of time which might be employed to better advantage."

He ceased speaking long enough to ignite his cigar.

"With your rifle covering me, I could not, as a gentleman who respects himself, give you the pledge which you demanded. Now, it is different, and I don't mind telling you that I mean to go to the Debonay ranch, even though you try to prevent me. I have traveled this far for the express purpose of visiting Pierre Debonay. I would be a fool to beat a retreat now; and the worst of my enemies never dare accuse me of being that."

There was just the faintest suspicion of a sneer in the tone with which Genteel Guy made response:

"Give matters that turn, if it pleases you. Whether you go willingly, or whether you are forced to make the trip, matters little to me. But let the affair turn out as it may, you shall have no excuse for accusing me of deceiving you."

"I still believe you to be the man known as Windy Jess. It is barely possible that I could not swear to your identity even were you without a disguise, for I never met that accomplished rascal but once, and then hardly long enough to take a very accurate photograph."

"That should not give you much uneasiness," was the cool retort. "You can hang on general principles, and trust to luck for future identification. Seems to me I've heard of something like that, connected with this region."

"I can do better than that," quietly. "I am expecting a friend to whom Windy Jess is perfectly familiar, and whose eyes are keen enough to pierce any disguise that cunning rascal may assume. I mean Mark Boyd."

"Of the Rangers?" asked Bloodgood with interest.

Genteel Guy nodded, eying him keenly the while.

"And he will be at the ranch?"

"If not when we arrive, soon afterward. He promised me to call to day, and he's a man who never broke pledge, whether given to friend or foe."

"Or else he has changed greatly since he and I met last!"

"You admit knowing him then?"

"Why not? I know him as well as I do my own brother."

"Yet I never heard him mention the name of Fred Bloodgood; and we have very few secrets from each other."

"All that may be true enough, since it has been a little more than five years since Mark and I clasped hands for the last time," with a stifled yawn; then adding, a little sharply: "Pray have you concluded your catechism? If so, would it not be quite as well for us to proceed on our way? I, for one, am both jaded and hungry, since we took saddle at day-dawn, and have not broken fast since that hour."

"Promise me to go along quietly and I'll make all the haste you can desire—"

"Still harping on that string! Well," with an impatient fling of his hand, "I'll give you any promise you can ask, since you no longer hold your rifle at my breast. But after we meet Mark Boyd, and he tells you that you have been making an unmitigated ass of yourself—as he surely will—I will have the honor of giving you a brief lesson in common politeness."

"And I promise you a most attentive pupil, never fear. But let that rest until we have seen Mark Boyd—"

"Which I trust may be— Ha!" and the dark face lighted up suddenly as he looked straight over Genteel Guy's head, with one hand extended. "There he is now!"

Both tone and action were so natural that the young man wheeled in his tracks to look in the direction of the extended forefinger, without a thought of treachery, but as he did so, Bloodgood drew a revolver and grasping it by the barrel, leaped forward and brought the silver-bound butt with a crushing force down upon Genteel Guy's head, felling him to the ground like an ox in the shambles.

Lithe as a panther, the fellow leaped upon him, tearing the rifle from his nerveless grasp and casting it beyond reach, then twining his muscular fingers around the luckless foreman's throat as though bent on completing his treacherous work without delay.

There was only a tremulous quivering of the limp form; no struggle, no attempt to free itself. That blow had done the work only too well, and satisfied of this, Bloodgood arose, and with a contemptuous smile showing his teeth, he turned the body over with one foot, gazing down upon the distorted face thus revealed to view.

"And this is one of their brag men! One of their fighting game-cocks? The fire-eater whom the desperadoes cannot name without their cheeks paling and their eyes roving round to make sure that the way is open for their escape by flight! Bah!" and he laughed mockingly. "He has shown himself a double-dyed idiot, only one scale above those who so greatly fear him for the reputation he has won—how? Give it up."

With a short, scornful laugh, he stripped off the belt of weapons, and cast it far away in the grass, then turned and uttered a sharp whistle, that brought his horse trotting to his side with a pleased whinny.

Taking the lasso from where it hung coiled at the saddle-bow, he stooped again and swiftly wound coil after coil of the rawhide rope around the body of his victim, dexterously knotting the ends, then giving a nod of self-approval.

"Let him crawl out of them unaided, and I'll be ready to admit that he's all he's cracked up to be!"

Squatting on his heels close beside the senseless man, Bloodgood quietly puffed away at his cigar, watching the slow recovery of his senses, and laughing insolently as Genteel Guy finally opened his eyes, with a dazed stare.

"My dear sir," he cried with mock enthusiasm, "you can't imagine how intensely delighted I am at beholding those sweet orbs of heavenly blue once more! I really began to fear that your unlucky stumble would prove fatal, and— My dear fellow, don't; I beg of you, don't!" as Genteel Guy strove to arise, then, realizing that he was in the toils, making a desperate effort to free himself.

"You've done this, you cowardly, treacherous devil—"

"Of course I have. Leaving off the epithets, of course," was the cool response, cutting short the indignant speech of the prisoner. "Unlike yourself, I never do things half-way."

Genteel Guy averted his head, with a bitter curse at his stupidity in letting himself be so shamefully duped.

"I might have known it!" he muttered, more to himself than to the other. "Twice I have let up when I held a sure thing. The third time I'll strike before parleying!"

"The second time you mean, my dear sir," blandly corrected Bloodgood. "You forget that you and I never met before this day."

Genteel Guy turned his face toward the speaker, his eyes flaming, his voice hoarse with poorly controlled passion.

"You are still sticking to that lie—"

"You are the the liar, not I, if you say that I am the fellow you call Windy Jess," was the swift interruption.

"If not that slippery scoundrel and cut-throat, you are a fitting mate for him," undauntedly. "But you lie in denying yourself. If not him, why have you treated me after this fashion? Why did you strike me down from behind, without a word of warning?"

"Why did you cover me twice with your rifle? Did you give me warning then? Yes—after you had the drop! Very well; I do the same now, simply to avoid unnecessary bother. I hold your life in the hollow of my hand. What is there to hinder my taking it?"

"Your fear of a hereafter," was the swift reply. "You were seen to ride back to join me. If you kill me, I will be missed by my friends, and the manner of my taking off investigated. You will be suspected. You will be

hunted down, and—well, I leave the rest to your imagination!"

Fred Bloodgood laughed mockingly as he made reply:

"A better argument than I made when you held my life at your finger's end—because you love life more than I, perhaps. Of course it is not cowardice—"

"Set me free, and with empty hands against your tools, I'll take pleasure in proving which of us two can most rightfully be called cowardly!" hotly cried Genteel Guy; but Bloodgood only shook his head, with a soft laugh.

"My dear fellow, you have cheek equal to that of a Government mule! In short, you ask entirely too much. Supposing for a moment that I am Windy Jess, would I set you free, after having you foul, after you have sworn to show me no mercy?"

"No; you'd slit my throat. Why don't you set about it?"

"Because I am not Windy Jess. From the first, you have been yelping on a false trail—"

"Then who in thunder are you?" impatiently cried Abbey.

"Fred Bloodgood, at your service," his tone changing to one more serious. "Listen for a moment, my friend. To the best of my knowledge, you and I never laid eyes on each other before this day. I have been in the territory less than one week. I never even heard of your name before we were introduced by Miss Debonay. You remember your words and looks, back at the timber island. They were insulting, but I kept my resentment in check, because I believed I divined the reason for your surliness; you saw that I admired Miss Debonay, and looked upon me as a possible rival. But in your foolish jealousy you went a little too far. I saw you aiming your rifle at me, and that was the last feather. I rode back to give you one more chance. You would not accept it. I plainly saw that you would ruin my plans, if I permitted you to run the length of your tether, and so I brought you up with a round turn."

"All of which amounts to nothing," impatiently. "It neither explains who you are, nor why you have committed this outrage upon me."

"My dear fellow, you are terribly dull of comprehension. One would think you were a child, learning your letters. Listen, and I will make one more attempt."

"My name is not Windy Jess, but Fred Bloodgood. I came here to interview Pierre Debonay, on a very important subject. I am an utter stranger to him, and the story I have to tell will be difficult enough for him to believe, under the most favorable circumstances. Its very nature would make him distrustful of me, and this would be increased to positive suspicion, were you to give mouth as you threatened, before I had time sufficient to convince him of my perfect truth."

"I frankly admit that I am not taking all this trouble from pure benevolence, but that I expect to make my expenses, and maybe a trifle more, through the gratitude of our mutual friend—if such I may call a gentleman whom I have never met in the flesh."

"In plainer words, you hold some secret of his, through means of which you hope to bleed his pocket?" sneered Guy.

"Something like it," coolly admitted Bloodgood. "You see I am perfectly frank with you, because I feel tolerably certain that you will not interfere further with my little game. Can you guess of what I am thinking, just now?"

"Some further rascality, of course," sullenly. "If you had said folly, you would have come closer to the bull's-eye. I was reflecting whether or not I should turn you loose."

"Do that, and I'll take back what I said about your being a coward!" eagerly cried Genteel Guy, his eyes aglow.

"I will—on conditions."

"What are they?" but with the light fading in his eyes.

"That you pledge me your sacred word of honor that you will remain quiet; that you will not speak or write a word to mortal being between now and this time to-morrow."

"And thus give you ample time for carrying out your devilish schemes? I'll die, rather!"

"You're a bigger idiot than I thought you—and that's needless! Look here, young man. I swear to you that I meditate no harm to any of your friends. Instead, I will give joy unspeakable to your employer and to his daughter. I will tell them my story, and give them the proofs of its truth. Then I will go my way, and trouble none of you again. Is that plain enough?" demanded Bloodgood, throwing away his cigar and bending forward, his eyes glowing vividly.

"If I could believe it—yes!" slowly responded Genteel Guy. "But I do not. You are Windy Jess. Your limber tongue has betrayed you a thousand times over. You mean some devilry, and only want to keep me from interfering before your evil schemes are complete. You'll get no promise from me."

"I'll give you one, to set the example. Swear that you will lie quiet here, and not attempt to attract the attention of any one who may chance to pass this way before morning, and I

swear to come back with the rising of the sun, to set you at liberty, restore your weapons, and, if you feel in the least aggrieved at the treatment to which you have been subjected, give you all the satisfaction that you can digest. What say you?"

"That I'll make no bargain while my hands are tied—least of all, with a scoundrel like you!" hotly cried Guy.

"Then I'll waste no further time," coldly added Bloodgood, drawing a long-bladed, keen-pointed bowie-knife from his bosom, and feeling the edge with his thumb. "For the last time—will you promise?"

"No! Strike, you cowardly cur!" cried Genteel Guy, not a muscle quivering save with rage and scorn.

The polished blade flashed in the bright sunlight as the weapon rose in the air and hung for a moment above the prostrate man's bosom. The white teeth gritted through the heavy fringe of jetty hair, the black eyes glared down into the blue orbs, but without detecting the slightest trace of fear—and then the weapon flashed downward; only to be as swiftly checked, even as its keen point pricked the skin directly over the young man's heart.

"You have got the grit!" muttered Bloodgood, drawing back with a short nod of grim approval. "I may have to do it yet, but I'll give you one more chance for life. I'd hate to kill a man with the nerve you've got, but I can't have you shuffling the cards after I've stocked them so masterly."

"You are the coward, as I knew from the first," muttered Genteel Guy, with a short, contemptuous laugh. "You dare not even stab a bound and helpless man. For the first time I begin to believe that I wronged—not you, but Windy Jess! He was not a coward, whatever his other failings!"

Bloodgood laughed softly, as he thrust the knife into the ground, and drew a gold coin from his pocket.

"I felt confident that time would show you your error, my dear fellow. I'm only sorry that you made the discovery so late. I can't set you free, now. I may have to kill you. It all depends on luck."

"You see this coin? I'll toss it, heads or tails, to see whether you lie here a live man or a corpse. Call!"

With a scornful sniff, Genteel Guy averted his head. He believed this rascal was only playing with him, as a cat plays with a mouse before killing it, and he would not humor him in the least. Bloodgood laughed softly, then spun the golden disk high into the air, calling out clearly:

"Heads you live, tails you die!"

The coin fell directly before Genteel Guy's face, and he could not help seeing that the head was uppermost.

Without a word, Bloodgood fashioned a gag and prying open Guy's jaws with the point of his knife, inserted it and tied it fast, then turned away and mounted his horse, saying:

"You can pray for some one to find you, before the wolves scent their feast! Adios, Genteel Guy! I go to join the fair Lucille!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MARTIN, THE SWAMP-FOX.

"You have your wish, Mr. Bloodgood. We are alone, and no one will interrupt our interview, unless they hear this bell ring," touching with the tip of one long, white finger, a massive silver call-bell which stood on the table, close to his elbow.

The speaker was Pierre Debonay, and he addressed Fred Bloodgood, who had lost no time in reaching the Debonay ranch, after leaving Genteel Guy Abbey helplessly bound on the plain.

He knew that the chances were a hundred to one against any mortal discovering the bound man, hidden as he was by the rank grass which grew between the twin land-waves, but he had played too many desperate games not to know that sometimes the single chance proves more powerful than all the host against it. If nothing had gone wrong, he would have played his cards more deliberately, particularly as he could not help seeing that Pierre Debonay had taken a strong dislike to him from the very outset, despite the eloquent manner in which Lucille detailed the exciting events of the day, dwelling far longer on her last escape, than on the first, for obvious reasons. Then, too, from words which the maidens had let drop, he knew that Mark Boyd was expected some time that afternoon, and little relished the idea of meeting the keen-eyed Ranger just at that stage of the game.

Spurred on by these reasons, Fred Bloodgood, in a tone that was almost a demand, requested the ranchero to favor him with a private interview. It was granted, but with an icy politeness that would have sharply stung one less thick-skinned than the worthy "tenderfoot."

"Which you think me very impertinent in asking, under the circumstances," laughed Bloodgood, shortly, dropping into a chair and casting a keen, comprehensive glance around them.

The room was of moderate size, dark and gloomy, though the afternoon sun was blazing brightly without. The only visible opening in the four walls, was the doorway through which the two men had entered. The other three sides were piled up with books and papers from floor to ceiling, protected from the dust by heavy curtains of dark purple stuff, running on brass rods. Light and fresh air were admitted through a skylight in the ceiling, formed of thin, but stiff iron slats, so arranged that they could be closed by means of a cord and pulleys.

"And this is where you burrow, is it?" added Bloodgood, before the ranchero could either deny or assent to his former speech. "Well, no wonder you look like an animated mummy—"

"Was it to utter this speech that you demanded a private interview with me, Mr. Bloodgood?" a little sharply uttered the ranchero, his pale cheeks flushing, his dark eyes beginning to sparkle with more than aversion.

"Not precisely," easily replied Bloodgood. "The words slipped out almost before I knew it; but I'm not sorry that such is the case. It will put us more at ease—break the ice of formality, as it were. I'm afraid that I have some words to utter that will cut you still deeper—"

"Then, if you are a wise man, you will leave them unuttered, Mr. Bloodgood," said Pierre Debonay, with unusual rapidity. "You have been of service to my children this day, as they tell me, and I do not wish to pay a debt of that sort—"

Bloodgood yawned, without making the slightest pretense of concealing it, and Debonay rose half-erect, with the flush of anger deepening on his thin cheek, pausing from very amazement as Bloodgood struck the bell sharply, drawing:

"My dear fellow, never exert yourself unnecessarily, especially when you have a score of lazy servants, more or less, whom you pay handsomely for saving you that trouble. Come in, you ebony child of Satan!" he cried sharply as the door opened and a tall negro stood at the threshold. "Bring some liquor and cigars—the best you've got in the house—and spur your legs out of that graveyard amble into decent speed."

With his nose still higher in the air, his scorn too utter for ordinary expression, the servant gazed into the flushed countenance of his master, who visibly hesitated, then said:

"You can go, Pedro. This person—forgot himself, and fancied he was in a groggery. Close the door."

Pedro vanished, showing his white teeth in a grin of huge delight at the manner in which the ranchero had avenged the monstrous insult offered his dignity by this black-bearded stranger.

Fred Bloodgood leaned back in his chair, laughing softly.

"You do the act grandly, my dear fellow, but you are making yourself unnecessary trouble. Oblige me by ringing for that nigger, and when he comes, please duplicate my order."

Pierre Debonay stared at the speaker in growing astonishment. His eyes were clear, his face was not that of a drunken man, nor did he look at all like an insane person; yet one or the other he surely must be!

"You're way off the right track, old boy," and Bloodgood leaned indolently over the little table between them. "The fact is, I've got a long story to tell, and my ride has filled my throat so full of the dust and sand of this cursed country, that I shall have to irrigate frequently or injure my sweet voice. Call the nigger back, please."

"If I do, it will be to order him to kick you out of the building for an insouciant scoundrel!" flashed the ranchero, leaping to his feet with clinched fists.

Bloodgood raised his hand, lazily waving him back.

"Keep your seat, I beg of you, Mr. Debonay," he drawled, then with a startling change of tone and appearance, he uttered harshly: "Down, I say, or I'll take my departure without proving to you how blackly old Juno lied to you the day your only son and heir, Lucien Debonay, was lost!"

Pierre Debonay staggered before this sharp sentence as though he had been dealt a severe blow full in the face. His lips parted, but no sound issued therefrom, though his throat worked visibly and painfully. He sunk back into his chair, while Fred Bloodgood once more assumed the air of a polished gentleman as he spoke again:

"I humbly beg your pardon, Mr. Debonay, for my harshness, but I saw that you had taken an unreasonable dislike to me from the outset, and I thought you would be all the better for a little lesson of this sort."

"What do you know of—of—" faltered the ranchero, his voice failing him as he strove to conclude the query.

"Of the loss of your son?" interposed Bloodgood. "Everything. More than you ever suspected—far more than old Juno knew, though she kept back more than one fact which might

have cast a flood of light upon the affair at the time."

"Tell me—what you know!"

"I believe something was said about refreshments," quietly uttered Bloodgood. "Oblige me by ringing—thanks!"

The ranchero touched the bell with a trembling hand, and as Pedro reappeared, he bade him bring liquor and cigars. He was promptly obeyed, though the pompous dandy held his nose high in the air and made a wide circuit of the black-bearded stranger before placing the tray upon the table.

"Now make yourself scarce, Sambo," said Bloodgood, showing his teeth; "and if I catch you with your ears at the keyhole, I'll pin them fast to the door with a toothpick—you hear?"

The utterly disgusted negro beat a hasty retreat, muttering anything but compliments, and when the door closed with a "wooden damn," Bloodgood poured out a glass of brandy and swallowed it at a gulp, refilling and sipping more leisurely as he spoke again:

"Some twenty years ago, Pierre Debonay, you owned a fair plantation in Georgia, near what was once the Cherokee nation, though, as a nation, they had long been removed. Still, there were some few of the race—for the most part with white blood in their veins—remaining in the country. Among them was a man popularly known as Martin, the Swamp-Fox. I see you have not entirely forgotten him."

Pierre Debonay had all this time been fighting against the sudden and unwonted weakness which he had displayed on having this old, yet hardly cicatrized, wound so rudely torn open, and now had regained his customary coolness in a great measure.

"I remember the fellow; a hang-dog rascal, a thief, as proven; a murderer, as suspected with more than probability of the supposition being truth," he said, calmly; then adding with sharpness: "Was he any relation of yours?"

"Only my father," was the cool reply, as Bloodgood poured out a fresh glass of liquor, and lighted a cigar, gazing blandly through the smoke into the pale face of his host.

"You were wise in doubting my reception of any communication coming from your lips. Your father was a contemptible rascal, whom I flogged with my own hands, and I have an impression that I'll have to serve his son after the same fashion, unless he takes himself off in—"

Bloodgood, still smiling, suddenly showed the muzzle of a revolver above the table, as he spoke:

"I don't doubt your will, my dear sir, but I do your ability to carry out that partially uttered threat. Keep your seat, or I'll make business for the undertaker!" he hissed, his eyes glittering dangerously.

Pierre Debonay smiled coldly, and his voice was calm and even as ever, when he spoke:

"Were you to shoot, it would kill at both ends, and I am not afraid of your running that risk. You are a scoundrel, like that half-breed dog, your father, but I'm just in the mood now to humor you for a bit. Go on. Tell the cunning tissue of lies which I am sure you have come here to pour into my ears, no doubt thinking I would pay you well—and so I will; bestow upon you such a rich reward that you'll never feel the need of more, in this world!"

"Talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy land. And I'm open to lay odds that when I have unfolded my budget, you will not only beg my pardon for these insults, but will pay what I demand in return for my trouble, without a murmur."

Pierre Debonay leaned back in his chair, a cold smile on his thin lips, as though scorning to make reply.

"You were counted a very rich man in those days, and in that rather primitive region," continued Bloodgood, speaking rapidly, as though resolved to lose no more time in idle bickerings. "You were young, well fixed, had a lovely wife, and a most promising heir to your wide estates in the baby Lucien. But with all this, you was not wholly happy. And the cause of your discontent, lay in the shape of a few acres of land and a humble log cabin nestling upon it, owned by a half-breed Cherokee, Martin, the Swamp-Fox."

"He and his had been located there, long before you came into possession."

Pierre Debonay interrupted him coldly.

"I admit all this. Pray skip the preliminaries. Your company is not so agreeable that I care to have it unnecessarily prolonged."

"I prefer telling the story after my own fashion. Your likes or dislikes matter little to me. I have taken up the affair as a pure matter of business, but I warn you that with every insulting speech from your lips, I am adding to the sum total which you shall pay before I quit you."

"So much the worse for your back," was the swift retort. "I trust your constitution is a strong one, for I hardly care to go to the expense of a funeral, and I have too many valuable hands running loose to cast your carcass aside, without some such precaution."

Bloodgood showed his teeth in a sickly smile, but made no direct reply to this biting taunt.

"These few acres with the ugly cabin, proved an eyesore to you, for they were in full view of your front door, and cut off a portion of your view down the river. With that bit of land, you believed you would have nothing left to wish for, and you tried to buy it from old Martin. But the foolish fellow refused to sell. He made a living by hunting and fishing, and had little need for cash, his wants were so simple. Then you tried to scare him away, but with no better success. The blood of the old Indian chiefs flowed strongly in his veins, and he laughed at your threats. Poor old fool! He might have known that you would prove too much for him in the end, with your wealth and your grand friends who looked down in scorn on the dirty, lazy, thieving half-breed."

"One day you laid a charge against him of theft, and proved your accusation, to the satisfaction of the man before whom you had the poor devil dragged. Martin was found guilty and sentenced to fine and imprisonment. You whispered in his ear that you would get him his liberty, provided he would sell his cabin and land to you; but he laughed in your face."

"He went to jail, but he did not stay there long. Just how he contrived to escape, no man save himself could ever tell; but escape he did, and one afternoon he came upon your lady wife as she was strolling through the woods, and so terrified her that she screamed with affright, though old Martin to the day of his death solemnly declared that he meant her no harm, that he said nothing to frighten or anger her."

"Unfortunately for him, her screams were heard, and before he could either quiet her, or remove her foolish alarm, you and some of your friends came upon the scene. You were all armed, for you had been out shooting, and seeing the old half-breed holding the screaming woman, you doubtless believed he was criminally assaulting her; you see I give you the benefit of the doubt."

As though his throat needed moistening after such rapid speech, Fred Bloodgood paused for another drink, keenly eyeing the ranchero, who sat coldly impassive, like one who has made up his mind to endure the inevitable.

"Of all the party, you alone dared risk a shot, lest the fine lady receive what was meant for the half-breed. Your aim was true, and with a gasping cry, Martin, the Swamp-Fox released your wife, flung aloft his arms, staggered back and fell to the ground like a dead man, with the track of your bullet across his temples."

"At first you did not notice him further, all your attention being given to the woman, who was hysterically crying and sobbing. You questioned her, and she—either innocently believing or maliciously perverting the truth through a longing for revenge on the wretch who had dared frighten her—said that Martin had fearfully and shamefully insulted her."

"The old man recovered his senses sufficiently to overhear and deny this charge, but you would not listen to him. You and your friends seized and bound him to the nearest tree-trunk, tearing the rags from his back; and then, with your own hands you flogged the poor wretch until he could bear no more—until he fainted from pain and loss of blood, though not a moan, not a cry for mercy escaped his lips—until you believed you had killed him!"

"Even though you thought his spirit fled, your hatred was not satisfied, and you would not unbind him, but swore that he should remain there bound until the wolves and buzzards had picked his bones clean, as a warning for other rascals of his class. And he still hung there, kept from dropping into the pool of blood which had run down his limbs to the ground, only by the throngs which passed around his carcass."

"But for once you were overreached. Martin the Swamp-Fox was not dead. He was to live on for vengeance, though you never after that day laid eyes on his face."

"Who set him free, I never found out for certain. He kept the story of that day close locked in his own bosom, until the day of his death. But I more than suspect that it was Juno, the nurse whom you had chosen as special guard to your son and heir. After events seemed to indicate this."

"For nearly a year, after that day, you lived on in peace and contentment, for at last you had gained your end. You hunted around until you found several trifling debts which the old half-breed owed, and bought them up. No person could, or would, tell where the old fellow had gone to. You kept the story of that tragedy in the woods a close secret, you and the friends who were with you, though the mysterious disappearance of what you firmly believed was a corpse, gave you no little perplexity."

"The little property was advertised to be sold for debt, and when the day came, you were the purchaser at a trifling sum, for your wishes were well-known, and no man would bid in opposition. The money was paid to me—then a gawky stripling, ignorant and cowed—and I was politely given to understand that if I valued a whole skin, I had better levitate. I obeyed. You burned down the cabin, and removed

everything that could possibly remind you of Martin, the Swamp-Fox.

"But the sunshine could not last always, and the day came at last, when you were made to taste the reward of your crime.

"The river and the swamps below, were thickly infested with alligators that year, from some unknown cause which had driven them up from their other haunts. You had many a fine day's sport hunting and shooting them, and if I mistake not, on the very day to which I have now come, you were out with a jolly party of friends, thus enjoying yourself.

"Your sport was cut short by the faint sounds of the big bell which was rung only on unusually urgent occasions, and you hastened home, though even then you did not dream of what a terrible shock awaited you.

You found your wife in a swoon, your servants distracted, and old Juno lying covered with blood, apparently at her last gasp, and it was a long time before any one there present, dared tell you the story.

"While you had been hunting the alligators far away, one of those creatures which had its lair close by, in the river, was turning the tables most thoroughly, by hunting your son and his nurse.

"It had come unexpectedly upon them as they were lying, half asleep, near the river-bank, and had seized little Lucien before Juno comprehended the danger which threatened. She caught up a stone which lay hard by, and bravely rushed to the rescue of her nurseling, pounding the huge brute over the eyes as it was making off with the child. The alligator dropped the boy, and caught her, tearing one arm nearly off, then dropped her, again seizing the child and making off for good.

"This was the story Juno told, and the ghastly wounds she had received, caused you to implicitly believe her words.

"You searched for your child, but you only discovered a few torn and bloody fragments of its garments, and at last you gave over in despair, mourning the loss of your beloved heir."

Pierre Debonay flung out one white hand passionately.

"Why do you recall all this? Man, or devil, what is your object? What do you hope to gain by reopening this wound?"

"I might remind you that I am the son of Martin the Fox—that he solemnly swore me to avenge his wrongs, while dying—but instead, I tell you that old Juno lied; that Lucien was not devoured by that alligator!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE TEETH OF THE SWAMP-FOX.

PIERRE DEBONAY started from his seat with a low, gasping cry, his pale, thin face almost convulsed, his outstretched hands trembling, his whole appearance that of a man who has with difficulty schooled himself to believe death a certainty, only to hear the glad cry of a reprieve just as his feet are trembling on the brink of eternity.

Only for a moment, however. Once more Fred Bloodgood overreached himself, thanks to the jeering, mocking devil that betrayed itself in a smile, just as the passionate query rose in the throat of the ranchero.

A short, fierce struggle with his emotions, then the white face regained its wonted calmness, that wild light in his eyes changed to a look of quiet scorn, and as though he had risen from his chair for that purpose alone, Pierre Debonay poured a slight quantity of brandy into a fresh glass, and with it moistened his dry lips.

For the first time since the curious interview began, Fred Bloodgood betrayed signs of irritation, and the leer of taunting triumph left his black eyes as he saw how swiftly the ranchero recovered from what had been meant as a master-stroke in the bold game he was playing.

"I admire your nerve, old fellow, but it don't speak very loudly for your paternal affection," he muttered, with a short, ugly laugh.

"Why should your words affect me, more than any other empty, unmeaning sound?" coldly retorted the ranchero. "You forget that you sit there a self-confessed scoundrel. As such I regard you; as such I am listening to this tissue of lies; and as such I will take great comfort in watching my servants kick you out of the house and off the plantation, as soon as the truce to which I weakly consented expires."

Almost as quickly as he had lost it, Bloodgood recovered his wonted assurance, and made the best of his temporary defeat, changing the disagreeable flow of the tide, and resuming the thread of his narrative.

"You and yours wasted a great deal of the briny on that melancholy occasion, which might as well have been saved, for though there is little doubt but that the alligator meant business, he did not satisfy his appetite on that occasion. Your son Lucien was not devoured; he did not die then and there, whatever may have happened afterward?"

He paused, with a keen glance into the face of the ranchero, but if he expected another exhibition of weakness, or to be plied with questions, he was doomed to disappointment. With

an icy smile and scorn-curved lip, Pierre Debonay listened.

"Neither was old Martin, the Swamp-Fox, dead. For weeks he had been lurking around the plantation, watching for the chance to come when he might begin the series of blows with which he had sworn to avenge those you showered upon his back, that afternoon in the woods. He dared not burn powder, lest some one should discover him and betray him to you, when he knew that you would have him hunted to death like a wild wolf. He would have fared but slimly, only for kind-hearted Juno, whom the old fellow had passed many an idle hour with, in the days gone by. He knew he could trust her, and she proved her fidelity after a very substantial fashion, conveying him plenty of eatables and potables under cover of night—and her expansive dress.

"Old Martin was slow, but sure. He believed he could not die until he had wiped out the bitter wrong you had done him, and so he bided his time, not quite certain in what shape his first stroke for revenge should be delivered.

"Chance—or fate—decided for him. He was close at hand when that alligator made its attack, and as he only saw that his modern raven was in peril, he rushed forward to beat off the reptile, only succeeding after the old woman was badly hurt. And not until the peril was past, did he notice the whimpering little youngster, partially hidden beneath a bush, whither it had crawled, too terrified to cry aloud.

"He no longer doubted what shape his first blow for vengeance was to take, and the long blade which was wet with the blood of the alligator, now sharply pricked the black throat of the wailing negress. She was already almost frightened to death by her great peril, and Martin had little difficulty in extorting a solemn oath that she would never reveal more of the truth than he directed, for she knew him well enough to feel sure that he would drive the knife home in an instant, were she to hesitate.

"Never mind what he told her; you can guess something of it, remembering as you must, the story she told when you came back in answer to the alarm-bell. You never doubted her truth for her wounds were seemingly conclusive evidence. Then, too, the fragments of your son's clothing, blood-stained and bearing marks of what might well have been teeth, bore her out in the story she told, and Martin the Fox was too cunning and thorough a workman to leave behind him any tell-tale tracks.

"He, not the alligator, bore your son and heir away, plunging deep into the swamp, and living there for many days, slowly mapping out the trail he was to follow in the future, to make you drink deepest of sorrow and grief. All this time, he used the little lad as kindly as he knew how, often going hungry himself to give him a feast, showing great patience, for the child cried and worried constantly, missing his parents and home comforts, no doubt."

Again Bloodgood paused to pour out some more liquor, and to covertly watch his unwilling host; but though the face of Pierre Debonay was a shade whiter than usual, his thin lips a little more firmly compressed, there was naught else to show how bitterly each detail of that deliberately drawn picture cut his heart. Setting down his glass, the rascal added, in a tone of mock sympathy:

"It's almost a shame to torture you after this fashion, but setting aside the oath of bitter vengeance which I swore, long years ago, it is a point of honor with me to give back blow for blow, adding interest whenever I can conveniently do so. You have called me anything but a gentleman—you would have kicked me out of doors like a beggarly dog, if I had not kicked against that—"

"Which is a pleasure I have simply postponed for a few minutes," coldly interposed the ranchero. "When your wind gives out, and you have come to the end of this marvelous recital, I'll give Pedro a chance to avenge himself."

"And find yourself obliged to advertise for a complete retinue, in consequence!" sneered Bloodgood. "Well, if you can stand the pressure, I'm sure I had ought to. But to business."

"At last Martin, the Swamp-Fox, fancied his plans for the future were thoroughly mapped out, and that same day he set out for a gang of his own sort, a remnant of the once notorious Pony Club; thieves, robbers and assassins, as you may remember, but which was then reduced to a small party, the majority of them being men in whose veins Indian blood flowed in a greater or less degree.

"He was nearing the rendezvous, when he was forced by the coming of night, to stop over in the swamp. He fed the child, and then they lay down to sleep close beside a little fire.

"Unfortunately for them, the heat drew a rattlesnake to the spot, and in its restless sleep, little Lucien rolled over against the reptile, and was bitten. Its cry awoke old Martin, and he was just in time to thrust the boy aside as the snake struck again, receiving the fangs in his own arm.

"Killing the snake he looked to the child first,

his lust for revenge being far greater than his love of life. He saw that the fangs had sunk deeply into the lad's arm, and the white flesh around the twin punctures was already beginning to swell.

"He had no liquor with him, so he did the next best thing: twisting a stout thong tightly around the arm, above the bite, then using his knife freely, gashing the flesh nearly to the bone, after which he covered the bleeding wound with powder, to which he applied a living coal, holding the child firmly while the powder flashed and hissed, thoroughly searing the injury.

"This done, he attended to his own hurt after the same rude, but effective fashion, then shouldered the sobbing lad, and plunging through the night, by no means certain that the deadly poison was killed, and hoping to reach the rendezvous where he knew he would find friends, before his powers should fail him.

"Thanks to his iron nerve, he succeeded in this, though he was scarcely conscious of the fact, for many days afterward, for his delay in working to save the life of the child, almost proved fatal to himself.

"But Martin, the Swamp-Fox was not fated to die just then, nor after that fashion, and both he and the lad recovered their strength in the course of time. While he lay ill, he had an abundance of time for reflecting over his line of revenge, and this is what his final conclusions amounted to:

"He would not kill the child. Instead, he would rear him among the outlaws, and make him one of the worst among them all. He would teach him to forget the past, then instill in his mind the bitterest hatred for you and yours—would raise him as the instrument of his vengeance, at the same time keeping such a record that there would be no difficulty in proving his identity at any time. He believed he could make you the prime mover in bringing the child—the future man—to the foot of the gallows, and then he would strike his last, most bitter blow, by proving the doomed man your long lost son. Poor devil!" with a mock sigh; "it's a pity that such a beautiful and romantic scheme should come to naught—but such is life, and I came here to tell you the truth.

"Less than a year after their arrival at the rendezvous, nearly dead, a descent was made by the soldiers, and the Pony Club was fairly blotted out of existence, though a few of the band escaped by taking to the swamp; among them, old Martin.

"I was with him, and it was not until all danger of pursuit was over, that the stern old man let me know that he had received his death-wound before he took to flight.

"Though he knew that death was stealing upon him, he made no moan for himself, his chief regret being the fear that the stolen child would be found by the soldiers and restored to its parents. And then, with his hands, growing colder, his voice gradually weakening, he bound me by the most solemn oaths to carry on his vengeance to the bitter end. I took the required vow, scarcely knowing to what I was pledging myself, for I am free to admit that I was a bit of a coward, in those days, and could only think how I was to get out of the scrape with a whole skin. Still, old Martin believed me, and died not altogether unhappy, coupling your name with a curse as the last flicker of life went out.

"I fled in hot haste. Where I went or how I managed to live during the next few weeks, I cannot comprehend to this day. It is like some fearful nightmare, and you must excuse my dwelling on that point.

"Of what followed I know little save through hearsay, for I fled far from the scenes of my childhood, gradually rising in life until I became a full-fledged gambler, sport, fire-eater and several other noble professions, which my modesty prevents me from naming in full.

"That is sufficient of myself for the present; let me hark back to the old trail.

"Old Martin must have trusted his schemes of vengeance to others than me, judging by what happened not long after the Pony Club was broken up. You can remember your losses by fire and poison. Day by day you grew poorer, and all the detectives you summoned to your aid could not solve the mystery or detect the cunning rascals who did their work so well.

"You grew moody and spiteful in temper. You quarreled even with your wife, who had given you a daughter, instead of the son for whom you longed. At length there was an open row, and she left you to return to you no more, going to her father's house. There was a long contest over the possession of the child, which was terminated by the sudden death of your wife. Then all your old love returned, and you bitterly reproached yourself with having caused her death.

"What a pity that old Swamp-Fox died before that day. It would have been a most delicious morsel for the grim old sinner!" laughed Bloodgood, with malicious emphasis, as he covertly watched the ranchero, fully expecting him to burst forth in anger.

But he was foiled once more. A trifle paler, if that were possible; no other sign did the strong man show.

"You sold out the remnant of your property, took your daughter and left, no man could say whither at that time.

"Some years later, professional business called me to St. Louis, and one day I came across two boys fighting each other in the street. It was a plucky struggle on both sides, and I stopped to watch them. No policeman was near to interfere, and the struggle continued until the larger, heavier lad owned up beaten. Something in the face of the victor strongly attracted me. It seemed as though I must have known him back in the past, and I helped to brush his clothes. He looked up as he thanked me, and then I knew the truth—I knew that I had found young Lucien Debonay, your long-lost heir!

"Like a revelation the memory of that old vow came back to me, and I could almost hear the dying voice of old Martin reproaching me for having failed him, so shamefully betraying the sacred trust he had bequeathed me.

"I was older, more hardened, a man of the world, then, and I concluded that I would look into the matter a little, and, if it would not too seriously interfere with the plans I already had mapped out, give a sacrifice to the offended manes.

"To make sure that I was on the right trail, I contrived, while pretending to arrange his torn clothing, to obtain a glimpse of his arm, and there I found the scar which marked the spot where the rattlesnake had buried its fangs. After that, I felt no doubt as to the lad's identity, and questioned him closely, yet so carefully that he could have no possible suspicion that I was pumping him.

"He was a bright little rascal, and answered me frankly, but I had learned to trust nothing to chance, and secretly followed him home. What I learned during the next few days, may be briefly summed up.

"The lad was the adopted son of a rich merchant who did a rushing business down near the wharf. He had been given a good education, so far as it went, and was then preparing for college, though so young.

"My inquiries ended there, for the time being, owing to an unfortunate misunderstanding which caused me to leave St. Louis without the usual formalities, but the curious meeting still haunted me, and during my enforced rustication, I visited our old stamping grounds, and there learned of your social wreck and sudden disappearance. I tried in vain to get on your track, spending much time and money, finally returning to St. Louis, when I felt assured that my little escapade of that unlucky night, had blown over without positively implicating my name.

"Once there, I sought out your son, meeting with another surprise. His adopted father had been speculating rashly, and getting far beyond his depth, took passage to another land where stocks and bonds are unknown, punching his own ticket with a thirty-two caliber bullet.

"Not a dollar was left for the lad, though the will which the merchant left behind him, bequeathed more than a million to his 'dearly beloved son.' Unfortunately it was not worth the paper it was written upon.

"In my life, I had learned to take long risks, and I fancied I could see money at the end of this affair, if it was carefully conducted, and so I did my best to console the lad.

"While doing so, I drew from him the story of his early life, as far as he could recall it. Luckily there were enough prominent points to prove his identity with your lost son.

"He could remember the alligator, the name his nurse, whom he declared he had seen torn to pieces by the ugly reptile; his being carried off in the arms of an ugly old man; his being bitten by the rattlesnake and the heroic treatment of the injury, showing me the scar in proof of his words as he reached this point.

"After this his memory was a little hazy for some time, growing vivid again as he recalled the shooting and charging of mounted men into the wild place where he lived. He remembered being terribly frightened, thinking surely he would be killed, and of running away into the swamp. How long he wandered there he could not tell, but remembered reaching the bank of a river and lying down in the warm sun, almost starved, and so wearied that it did not seem as though he could take another step, even though his life depended upon doing so.

"But he was wrong there, for he was suddenly awakened, to see a panther crouching only a little ways off, seemingly in readiness to spring upon him, and with a cry of terror he rushed down the bank and plunged into the river. He remembered swimming down-stream for some time, then crawling astride a log which floated near.

"His next memory was of awaking in a warm bunk on board some sort of vessel manned by negroes, while a kind-featured and tender-voiced man bent over him. This was the man who afterward adopted him, and for whom he now mourned.

"This was more than enough to satisfy me that I had made no mistake, and I set about gaining his confidence. It was an easy task. Just then, poor fellow, for those who had made

much of him when he was the reputed heir of a millionaire, now shunned him whenever they chanced to cross his path, and he felt these repeated snubs acutely.

"Well, I had a few spare hundreds on hand, and thought I could afford to risk them in the investment. I did so, putting the lad into a good school, then set forth to hunt you up.

"It was like searching for a needle in a haystack, but I did not despair of final success, though I did not altogether forget my regular line of business while working the blind lead; and it was lucky, too, for through that I at length made the longed-for discovery.

"A certain bank lost its reserve fund, and somehow my name became mixed up with the affair. To avoid annoying questions I came further West, and by pure accident heard your name mentioned. I came here, and soon satisfied myself that you were my game, and am now looking for the dividends on my little speculations."

"That young man—he is my son!" gasped Debonay, his painfully enforced composure at length failing him.

"Now you are lying!" brutally sneered Bloodgood. "Your son is not here. He is dead and buried years ago!"

CHAPTER X.

BLOODGOOD CLAIMS THE STAKES.

In his intense excitement, almost suffocating with mingled hopes and fears, casting aside all pretense at cold composure, Pierre Debonay had raised from his chair, leaning with both hands on the little table which alone separated the two men, to support his trembling limbs as he gasped forth that question, his voice so husky and unnatural that Bloodgood interpreted his meaning more by instinct than ear. Sharp and cruel as a blow in the face to an unarmed and unsuspecting man, came his brutal answer.

Pierre Debonay sunk back in his chair, quivering in every limb as though suddenly afflicted with a palsy, staring in a painfully dazed manner at the malignant demon opposite him, but in which Fred Bloodgood saw only cause for merriment.

"Why, you idiotic old cat-swinger! Do you for a moment think I am such a blessed fool as to bring my man here before having it thoroughly understood what I was to earn for my trouble? That would be a sweet way to do business for my father's son, and with the cowardly villain who did his level best to flog an old and innocent man to death!"

Pierre Debonay had borne much from this fellow, but now Fred Bloodgood was to realize that he had gone a little too far, for, without the slightest warning, the ranchero left his chair in a sudden leap that carried him over the table far enough to dash his fist full into the foul-mouthed villain's face, then gripe his throat with his still sinewy fingers as both chair and table were overturned by the shock, hurling the men headlong to the floor, Bloodgood underneath.

Only for a moment. A giant in strength, lithe and hard to pin fast as a panther, a single desperate effort served to turn the ranchero, and free his throat from that tenacious gripe. A snarling curse broke from his clinched teeth, as he raised himself sufficiently to jerk a glittering blade from its hidden sheath in his bosom. The weapon hung over the head of Pierre Debonay for an instant, then fell—to bury its keen point deep into the floor!

Though he probably would have regretted such a termination to the interview which he had taken so many pains to bring around, there is not the slightest doubt but that Fred Bloodgood meant death when he raised his hand for that blow, but his fell purpose was foiled by the sudden flinging open of the door, the edge of which struck violently against his elbow, driving his arm forward, and aside, utterly destroying his aim.

Pedro, the black, had caught the sound made by the overturned furniture, and casting all ceremony to the winds in his love for his master, he flung open the door and rushed into the room, stumbling over the prostrate figures, before he saw them, falling headlong with a startled grunt.

No longer pompous, but half frightened and wholly angry, the negro leaped to his feet, only to go down like a log as the hard-clinched fist of Bloodgood struck him full in the unguarded throat.

Springing lightly back, Bloodgood closed the door, standing with his back against it, a cocked revolver in his hand, covering the ranchero as he spoke swiftly:

"Get up, you old idiot! But make another move like that, and I'll salivate you, sure! Quiet that nigger, before you send him away, or I'll kill you both! Be wise, and I'll tell you the rest of that story."

Slowly, painfully the ranchero regained his feet, wiping away the few drops of blood which trickled from a bruise on his temple. Bloodgood kept him covered, fully anticipating another assault, but Debonay smiled faintly as he read this suspicion.

"I apologize for having lowered myself even for a moment to the level of such a contemptible

scoundrel. I will not forget myself again. You can put up your weapon."

Bloodgood felt his cheeks flush crimson at the quiet scorn which permeated every word, but as the stunned negro at that juncture made a feeble attempt to arise, he slipped the revolver back into place, though still holding himself on guard.

Without once glancing toward him, Pierre Debonay passed over to the side of the servant, assisting him to arise, saying:

"Be a little less clumsy, Pedro, in the future, and never dare enter this room unless I ring for you. Offend in a like manner again, and I shall be compelled to dispense with your services altogether. You understand me."

"Fore de Lawd, Marse Pierre, I didn't mean no hurt!" faltered the bewildered negro. "I hearn somefin' tumble, an' I—"

"Enough!" was the stern interruption. "There's the door. Close it behind you, and come when I ring for you. Go!"

Reeling like a drunken man, the poor devil hastened to leave the apartment, his senses too thoroughly obfuscated too notice the knife which still stuck in the floor, or the grim smile with which Fred Bloodgood watched his retreat.

Pierre Debonay raised the table and chairs to their proper position, and resumed his seat, motioning Bloodgood to do likewise, his voice ringing out clear and sharp:

"Be seated. If you have anything more to say, state it as briefly as possible. Your company is rapidly growing unbearable, and I will not be answerable for the consequences if you try my temper any further.

With a low, jeering laugh, Bloodgood dropped into the seat.

"To hear your words, one would really think you had come out first best in our little brush, instead of owing your life to an accident, with the shaping of which you had nothing to do!" he said, mockingly. "But let that flea stick in the wall. I'm glad that the dark put in an appearance, just as he did, or I'd be out of pocket a few dollars by the operation."

"You'll get no money from me, through this clumsily trumped-up tale," said the ranchero, coldly. "If you leave the ranch with a whole skin, you may congratulate yourself."

"You haven't got any money to squander on either of those cards," laughed Bloodgood. "Bah! do you think for a moment that I would take all this trouble, without being sure of my hand? If so, you're going to get left, bad!"

"Say your say out, without further digression, or I'll sound this bell and bid my servants flog you off the estate like a cur. That language is plain enough for your comprehension, I hope," sternly uttered Debonay, his eyes flashing.

"Fling yourself wide open, old fellow, if you find any satisfaction in doing so," sneered Bloodgood. "I'm willing. Every hard word will have to be paid for, through the nose. When I came here, I was perfectly willing to take ten thousand and call it square; now I'll strike you for double the amount—and finger it, too, bet your sweet life!"

"Indeed!" sneered the ranchero. "For informing me that my son is dead and buried?"

"For owning up that I lied to you, when I slung those words at your head," was the frank reply. "I did lie, partly to make my little story more dramatic, but mainly because I felt bound to touch you up a little on account of Martin, the Swamp Fox. Sometimes I feel a trifle guilty at not having carried out his dying wishes more thoroughly, but hard cash counts more with me, just now, than an old pledge."

Stooping, he picked up the bottle which lay at his feet, but the liquor had all escaped, and he dropped it again.

"After a certain fashion, I did my level best to please the dead old man, and satisfying myself that you were too well fixed to leave this place very soon, I went back to where I left the boy. He was glad to see me, and I fancied that I would have little difficulty in working out the proper lead.

"Feeling no little remorse at having so long neglected the dying charge of old Martin, a brilliant idea had occurred to me, by means of which I hoped to revenge him and fill my own pockets, at one and the same time. Shall I tell you my idea?" with a diabolical leer, hastily resuming, as the ranchero stared past him as though he neither heard nor heeded.

"Silence gives consent, the world over. My little scheme was something like this:

"I would spend a month or two in corrupting the mind and morals of this youngster, who seemed to fancy that I carried the sun, moon and stars in my breeches pocket. Little by jerks, I'd let him into the secret of earning a living by one's wits, and then, when he was fully ripe for the climax, I would duly initiate him, taking care that a trail was left which would end in State's prison, or the gallows, if possible. This much for old Martin; then a stroke for myself. I would sell you your son, get the money, then put the bloodhounds on his trail, feeling pretty sure that old Martin would turn over in his grave for very joy as he saw your son and heir hung!"

Despite his admirably assumed stoicism, as he listened to these words, so full of infernally malignant cruelty, Pierre Debonay could not hinder his eyes from drooping nor his thin lips from quivering, though he uttered not a word in reply.

Bloodgood laughed tauntingly, but soon resumed his story.

"A neat little scheme, if I do say it myself. With ninety-nine boys out of a hundred, it would have worked to a charm, but unluckily for old Martin, this youngster proved the exception. Do what I would, say what I might, I could not get him to comprehend my meaning, and, though I lay no claim to tenderness of either heart or hide, I could not give a kick when a hint failed to do the work I desired.

"Just then a little financial speculation in which I was interested, turned out disastrously, and I had to levant without standing on the manner of my flitting. It was two years later before I got matters straightened out so that I could rejoin the youngster with anything like safety, and then I was almost shoal on the bar.

"Even then I was not quite reconciled to abandoning my plans of making Lucien a member of the fancy, but when he heard me speak of my impecuniosity, what does he do but pull out a healthy roll of greenbacks, the savings from the allowance I had made him while at college. That touched me, and I doubted no longer. I would restore him to you—if you came down liberally enough—and let old Martin take out his spite in haunting you, for lack of a more substantial revenge."

Breathless from his rapid speaking, Bloodgood paused, and Pierre Debonay slowly uttered:

"Then this young man who bore you company here, is the tool whom you have selected to aid you in carrying out your precious scheme?"

"I am the only man living who can positively answer either yes or no to that question," was the deliberate response. "And what I say, depends mainly on how you look upon the financial part of the matter. This much I will say: If you agree to my terms, I pledge myself to place your long lost son in your arms within a month from date, or—"

"Or fill them with a cunning impostor, well-trained by the vilest scoundrel since the death of Martin, the Swamp-Fox!" impulsively exclaimed the ranchero, his thin lips curling with strongly mingled scorn and disgust.

Bloodgood never flinched, and his voice showed no anger as he made reply:

"I am a man of business, from the bottom to the top notch and I have learned enough of you, to know that you keep your word, when it is once passed. Pledge me your word of honor, as a gentleman, that you will pay me the sum of money I demand, and on my part, I agree not to ask a cent for my time and trouble, if I fail to satisfy you that I am producing the Simon pure Jacobs. Can I say fairer?"

"Doubtless you have laid your wires perfectly, and well drilled your candidate in the part he is expected to play."

"I have never breathed a word to him of the truth. He has not the remotest idea that you are of any kin to him—"

"I take your protestations for just what they are worth—nothing," coldly interposed the ranchero. "Fortunately, or otherwise, as it may turn out, I can checkmate you, if you are playing a cross-game with me."

Abruptly rising from his seat, Pierre Debonay crossed the room and drew aside one of the heavy curtains, taking from a shelf paper, pen and ink. Resuming his seat, he wrote rapidly for a few moments, then tossed the still damp screed across to where Bloodgood was eagerly watching his every movement.

But the light of covetousness died away in his eyes, and gave place to a look of baffled rage as he read what was written. It was a pledge to pay—name left blank—the sum of ten thousand dollars, one month after date, provided certain conditions were fulfilled. It ended abruptly, without any signature.

Bloodgood dropped the paper, with an oath.

"And you think that will satisfy me? Do you take me for a fool?" he demanded, showing his white teeth beneath his overshadowing beard, his black eyes glittering as brightly and venomously as those of an enraged serpent.

"In more than one respect, yes," was the cool answer. "In others, an unmitigated scoundrel, for whom hanging is too good. Above all, an ass for thinking that I would pay you one red cent without first assuring myself that you were not trying to beat me with worse than worthless goods."

"You'll pay me double that sum, either in cash, or with a check on your banker. If the last, you will make it payable to bearer, and give me in addition, a letter which will hinder the bank officials from asking too many questions before cashing the draft. Refuse—"

"Well?" coolly questioned the ranchero, as he hesitated.

"You will never set eyes on your son. More than that, I swear to kill him like a dog! Now you've got it. Choose!"

"I have chosen," with cold decision. "I be-

lieve you are lying to me—that this tale of your discovering my poor son is false from beginning to end. Still, I am willing to investigate the matter. If you are right, I will give you ten thousand dollars in hard cash or notes, just as you prefer. But not until I have had one full month to satisfy myself that the youth you produce is indeed the child for whom I have mourned so long and bitterly."

Despite the iron hand with which he kept his emotions in check, the voice of the ranchero grew husky as he uttered these words, and he abruptly broke off speaking. When he resumed, all traces of weakness had vanished.

"You have my ultimatum. Take it or leave it, just as you think best. I will make no other offer, though you pile threat upon threat until you could use them as a stair-case to mount to heaven itself!"

Fred Bloodgood was gnawing at the ends of his magnificent beard, his black eyes filled with furious rage at what he could not avoid admitting as a defeat—and that just when he felt that he held cards that must sweep the board.

He could see that the ranchero was in deadly earnest; that he had spoken his final word, unless his terms were accepted, and fearing to linger longer, lest Mark Boyd should put in an appearance, he yielded, though sullenly.

"Sign that paper, and I'll tell you where your son may be found. Put my name, Fred Bloodgood, in that blank, to—"

"Take the document just as it is, or leave it," was the cold interruption. "It is just as binding on me, and without a signature you will hardly think it worth while to attempt to have it discounted before the month is up."

"And when I come for my pay, you'll have the bloodhounds ready to nab me!" snarled the desperado, viciously.

"You hold my word of honor that, so far as I am concerned, you may come and go without molestation. You have not entered into this affair without satisfying yourself that my simple word is as good as my bond. Come here, one month after you show me the person whom you claim is my lost child, and if I am satisfied of your truth, you shall have the money. If I find you have attempted to deceive me, still you shall depart as free as you came. I swear this, on my honor."

"You carry matters with a cursed high hand!" "When dealing with self-convicted scoundrels—yes."

"All right!" and Bloodgood flung himself back in his chair, with a sullen scowl. "We'll settle one matter first. Call your nigger, and let him show up the young chap who came here with the girls, this afternoon."

Pierre Debonay touched the bell, and the door was opened cautiously, Pedro still wearing a dazed and bewildered look, clearly not having entirely recovered from that terrible blow in the throat, just touching the knob with the tips of his fingers, his arm extended at full length, as he peered dubiously into the room, seemingly ready to dodge aside in case he should scent danger in the air.

Pierre Debonay gave him the order, and as the door closed once more, the two men maintained a silence which lasted until the youth, whom we have thus far known as Kirk Bloodgood, entered the gloomy apartment.

Bloodgood roused up a little, but did not rise from his chair as he waved his hand toward the pale ranchero, saying:

"Kirk, my lad, I promised you a surprise-party before long, and here you have it; that gentleman is your father!"

The young fellow turned a shade paler, staring from one to the other in mute astonishment, seemingly bewildered by this abrupt introduction. Nor was Pierre Debonay less agitated, though with a desperate effort of will, he regained his former cold expression, ere rising to his feet.

"My dear sir," he said, speaking slowly, as though he found some difficulty in securing the precise words he needed; "you hear what this—this man says—"

"But I don't understand him!" exclaimed the young man, shrinking back a trifle. "He's my brother—my father is dead—Fred!" turning swiftly upon the desperado, his dark eyes glittering vividly; "what do you mean?"

"Just what I say," was the cool response. "That gentleman is your father. I wish you to tell him the story of your childhood, just as you told it to me—"

"There is a still shorter method of getting at the bottom facts than that," interjected the ranchero, his eyes glowing with suppressed emotion. "If this is the son I have long believed dead, he bears a birthmark on his person which will readily prove his identity—"

"I knew there was some mistake," and the youth laughed, a little nervously. "I pledge you my word, sir, that I have not a blemish on my person, save a scar, received when a child!"

"Where was this birthmark, and in what shape?" asked Fred Bloodgood, his face considerably paler, an uneasy light in his eyes, as though he feared his carefully reared structure was on the point of falling about his ears.

"On his right arm, midway between wrist and elbow, and it consisted of three small moles

forming a rude triangle, showing a tiny dot of the white skin in the center."

With a long drawn breath of relief, Bloodgood said:

"That accounts for it, then! I knew I could not have made such a clumsy blunder as all that comes to!"

"What do you mean?" sharply demanded the ranchero.

"Peel your right arm, Kirke, and satisfy the gentleman."

Without a word the young man did as directed, and eagerly catching the member, Pierre Debonay bent closely over it, only to start back with a low cry of mingled anger and disappointment; for there, between the wrist and elbow, directly on the spot where the triangle of moles should have shown, was a deep, broad scar, seemingly a combination of cuts and burns!

"How came that?" he demanded, hoarsely, touching the scar with one forefinger, as he stared keenly into the black eyes.

"I was bitten by a rattlesnake, and that is where the hurt was cut and cauterized," was the quick response.

Pierre Debonay dropped the arm, and said, abruptly:

"You may leave us. I will explain later. I am not fit just now. Pray rejoin the ladies and await my coming."

"Say good-by, first, old fellow," said Fred Bloodgood, carelessly extending his hand, which the other clasped, looking thoroughly mystified. "It's not likely that we will ever run in couples again, for which you are to be congratulated, as, no doubt, this gentleman will take pains to convince you. Go."

The young man obeyed, and as he left the room, Bloodgood turned once more to the ranchero, saying:

"Are you satisfied? Am I still a fraud in your opinion?"

"I can't think—it's all a dizzy whirl!" muttered the powerfully agitated man, sinking into the chair, bowing his head upon his hands. "Go, now. Come back in one month, and I will answer you positively. I want to believe you, but I cannot!" and he struck the bell impulsively.

When Pedro made his appearance, he was bidden show the man out and see that his horse was brought around.

Bloodgood made no further delay. Time had passed more rapidly than he had realized, and he dreaded the appearance of the Ranger lieutenant, before he could fairly get away.

Still wearing an uneasy look, the young man whom he had first introduced as his brother, accompanied him to where his good horse was waiting, but Bloodgood spoke few words to him.

"Tell him the story, precisely as you told it to me, and you'll come out on top of the heap. Good-by—I'm off!"

At the touch of the spur, the good horse dashed away, taking a course almost at right angles with that by which he had gained the ranch, Bloodgood casting occasional glances over his shoulder as he rode.

An abrupt curse hissed through his grating teeth, as he caught sight of two men in the distance, just rising a knoll.

"He saw a tiny puff of smoke, and then a bullet whistled past his ears, in uncomfortable proximity to them."

CHAPTER XI.

WHO SHALL WEAR KING SAUL'S SHOES?

IN some respects, Spitfire Saul had shown himself a shrewd and crafty rascal, as well as a bold and reckless, particularly when he found himself close pressed by men who had sworn to cling to the trail while the ghost of a hope of ultimate success remained to cheer them.

If all went well, when he made one of his sudden swoops upon a ranch, he would pursue the usual course, making either for the mountains with his plunder, until its profitable disposal could be effected, or else pushing straight for the border, beyond which he had sold the plunder before stealing.

On the contrary, should his carefully-laid plans miscarry, and the pursuit grow too hot, he would abandon his horned plunder, and with the solid-hoofed portion, strike straight into the desert, his trail gradually spreading out like the rays of an opened fan. There, with a lead of a few hours, he laughed all pursuit to defiance, for the action of the sun and the playing of the breeze over the dry sand, quickly obliterated the spoor, leaving those in pursuit to abandon the chase, or conduct it wholly at random, to in the end be driven back by the lack of water.

More than one veteran Ranger had set out with the firm resolve to never return to his mates without solving the mystery. All knew that somewhere amid that sterile, sandy waste, must be both forage and water, but as yet all efforts to discover the secret rendezvous of the Rustlers who owned Spitfire Saul as their king had failed.

Little marvel that such should be the case.

Situated nearly in the center of the most sterile district, which even the desert-born and reared Indians themselves declared was utterly without water, was a curious freak of nature, in the shape of a "sink."

Almost circular in shape, its diameter was something over a quarter of a mile, while its nearly level bottom was full fifty feet below the surrounding level. Its walls were very nearly perpendicular, and the sink could be entered or left at only two points, where the hand of man had plainly aided nature in shaping steep, winding trails, by means of which the desert above could be reached.

In the center of the sink stood a small but deep pond, fed by never-failing springs. Around this the grass grew thick and richly, while cottonwood trees lent a grateful shade, all the more dense from being close-trimmed at the top, causing them to branch out more freely. Not for this reason alone, however, had the tops been lopped off; rather to prevent them from showing above the edge of the sink, and with their green foliage warning the thirsty wanderer that near their roots might be found water in abundance.

Built against one side of the sink, was a large house of sunburnt bricks, only one story in height, profusely loop-holed for defense, the roof of which was covered thick with growing shrubs, rooted in the heavy coating of earth. Climbing vines covered the sides of the building, so that it could hardly be recognized as such from the level above.

A better lurking-place could scarcely have been contrived, for a thousand men might have passed the sink by within a hundred yards without once suspecting its existence, so level was the desert clear to the very edge of the depression.

On this day though, such passers by would have been given a more certain clue, in the guise of loud, excited and angry voices coming from the bottom of the sink.

Early that morning, one of the Rustlers had brought in startling tidings, relating to their captured chief. He told of dark threats and busy preparation, all of which centered around Spitfire Saul. In his spyings he had learned the meaning of this: that a mob was forming to take King Saul out of jail, and hang him; but he had not dared wait for more. A secret friend warned him that he was suspected of a dangerous interest in the case, and that it was already suggested that he be added to the neck-tie festival. As he could do nothing alone, he watched his chance, and fled to bear the news. None too soon, for he had barely cleared the town, when he heard the music begin for the death-dance.

For a few minutes nothing was heard save curses and threats against the lynchers; but then came a change. If King Saul was dead, the Rustlers were without a head. Some one must put on his shoes; who should it be?

Not a man among them all but felt himself amply able to wear them, with honor to himself, and profit to all, but at the same time, they knew that the final choice must lay between two men: the youngest and the oldest of the company then present.

"Ef you critters hes palavered enough, le's git down to solid business," impatiently cried one of the party. "Ef it's too late to save the old boss, it ain't too late fer to git even with the pizen cusses as sent him over the range. We cain't do nothin' without a chief, an' so I nomerates Lofty Dick as the best man to fill King Saul's shoes!"

A brief silence—then a few cheers; in the midst of which a tall, crooked fellow croaked forth an amendment:

"The boy's good enough, that we all know. He's done red-hot work at close quarters, and a man couldn't ax a better backer fer a tight rub. But at the same time, I reckon he's got too much git thar 'bout him fer ther posish. It calls fer a man who kin keep a cool head when it's rainin' fire and brimstone. Sech a man was King Saul, an' jest sech another I perpose shell take his place; which his han'le is Buffalo Red. Them as seconds my motion, speak your little pieces!"

Cheers from those who had maintained silence when the first name was proposed. Silence among those who had then expressed their satisfaction, and the two parties instinctively separated, each with their chosen leader at their head.

Lofty Dick had not been dubbed thus, from his extraordinary altitude of person. He was barely up to the average of his sex, slender, seemingly frail in build, with the hands, feet, waist, voice and complexion of a woman. As he stood there, he looked like some society darling in a masquerading suit, rather than one of the hottest and swiftest fighters on the southwestern border.

His garb was that of a Mexican ranchero of the richest class, made of the finest material, silk and broadcloth, a little flashy in colors, perhaps, but fitting his trim, graceful figure to perfection. From beneath his low-crowned, broad-brimmed sombrero, golden curls fell over his shoulders. His eyes were large, of the deepest blue, and were full of expression. His skin was marvelously fair and smooth. A slight mustache shaded without concealing the red, arched lips which, with the small, even teeth, white as milk, a society belle might well have envied.

Very different in outward appearance was

the man called Buffalo Red. Tall and massively built, he stooped so much that he had almost the appearance of being humpbacked. His florid face was nearly lost to view amid a rough, bristling forest of hair, once bright red, but now of a peculiar foxy hue, from the frosty touch of time. His hands and feet were enormous; his legs widely bowed, as though from too much early riding; his voice harsh and disagreeable.

His merits, viewed from Rustler stand-point, were an indomitable courage, tempered with a cool brain and keen wits, which told him when it was better to run than to fight; great skill with his weapons, and thorough devotion to his comrades, more than one of whom he had saved from death by risking his own life, when others had abandoned them.

As the two parties separated, the first thought of all was to count their respective numbers, which resulted in disappointment for both, as they proved to be exactly the same: eleven on each side.

"Hello!" suddenly exclaimed the man who had nominated Lofty Dick. "Thar's Brocky Bill. Come over this way ol' coon!"

"Not much he won't!" retorted the rival spokesman. "The old man knows the pure quill from spilt cider! He trains with this outfit—don't you, Brocky?"

Apart from the rest, squatting on his heels and whittling a stick, whistling softly to himself, was the man alluded to as Brocky Bill. Dirty, greasy, slouchy in attire as in motion; with a face that was almost hideous from the ravages of small-pox, the purple pits and scars of which had given him his title of "Brocky," in the expressive argot of his class; his small head being almost wholly denuded of hair, probably from the same cause, the little remaining being "neither fox nor possum," but of a peculiar, composite order, giving no clue to his age. He might have been classed among the youngest of the company, or stationed with the elders, violating the proprieties in neither case, so far as one could judge of his age.

All eyes were now turned upon him, for it appeared that he held the power of nominating the successor to King Saul, but Brocky Bill kept on whistling and whittling, only a sly twinkle in his one remaining eye, betraying the fact of his having heard the appeals, and that he fully comprehended the state of affairs.

Thick and fast came the appeals, first from one side and then from the other, until it seemed as though weapons would be drawn and powder burned to clinch the argument, but before the final feather was applied, Brocky Bill looked up from his whittling, with a peculiar, drawling whine.

"Durn an' double-durn all sech p'isen, contrary critters as you all be, anyhow! Caint ye let a pore cuss do a bit o' peaceable thinkin', 'thout your caterwaulin' an' high-hoopin' all over him wuss then a stack o' tom-cats onto a 'nip bed?"

"Business comes fu'st, Brocky," answered Appetite Dandy, the spokesman for Lofty Dick. "You kin 'tend to your po'try-writin' when they ain't sech a rush as now. All's spit out thar senterments 'cept you, an' the way things look now, I consait that your word'll settle the hitch-tight."

"Which it'll be fer Buffalo Red, in course!" hastily edged in Snapper Johnny. "The only man in the hull outfit that kin wear King Saul's shoes, without havin' to use a spy-glass to find himself the next mornin'! Spit it out, old mate, an' put a stop to the agony."

Brocky Bill drew his awkward, gangling frame erect, and cast a whimsical glance with his one eye around the eager parties, still slowly whittling, again whistling softly. It was plain to be seen that he hugely enjoyed his sudden importance, and that he meant to make the most of it while he might.

"An' my vote 'lects the boss, does it, now?" his whine more accented than usual. "You cain't git along without the ole man, now? An' when I vote, you all won't pitch into each other, tooth an' toe-nail, will ye, now?"

"Of course not!" impatiently cried Lofty Dick. "I did not seek the office, but since my name has been advanced, and so much said for and against it, I'm in the field to stay—unless you vote with the other side. If you do, I'll be the last man to kick."

"You cain't neither o' you git thar, unless this ole coon says so, eh? Waal, we need a head; thar ain't no gettin' round that point. We'll bu'st wide open ef somebody don't take the cheer to keep us all in the traces. Eyther one o' you two men could do it, ef the other didn't kick up too big a bobbery over gittin' left. But that's the point! Thar's jest one way to git around it; which this is them—scratch both names off o' the ticket, an' wote straight fer Brocky Bill, Double-X-quire, an' so fo'th, amen!"

More at his quaint whine, and still more comical assumption of dignity, the Rustlers burst into hearty laughter, and the shrewd twinkle in Brocky Bill's eye, told those who knew him best, that he felt his point was gained. Not the election; had it been unanimously offered him, Brocky Bill would have declined the office, without a moment's hesitation, for he

knew that he was a good follower where another led, but not of the material from which such chiefs are made. But he saw that the angry passions were growing more and more dangerous, and knew that they needed every arm to fight against the odds which they were liable to encounter at any hour.

"That's a-plenty nonsense," he added, as the laugh subsided. "Let the ole man git down to business. King Saul is tuck. Some say he's lynched, but that we cain know fer sure, an' while thar's a hope, slim as a spider's thread, we want to hang onto it an' not give up, nor fergit that we owe it to him as our boss—an' a boss that we'll never see the ekil to ag'in, ef we live tell the sky draps onto our cabezas—to git him out o' limbo, or bu'st our s'penders a-tryin'! I ax you all, ain't that so, gents?"

A general murmur gave assent, and drawing a fresh breath, the scare-crow orator proceeded:

"I reckon you critters hes pitched onto the two best men fer the work that ye could git. Take Lofty, f'rinstance. He don't shet off a monstrous sight o' sunlight, but then a mule kin kick harder then a mount'in, an' a twenty-two pistil 'll kill a man jest as quick as a hundred-ton cannon, ef it's got the right amount of skill to point it straight. He's got a neat little graveyard o' his own, with a popelation which is steady growin'. He's chucker full o' pluck an' sand then a buck flea is o' bites. He never went back onto a mate. He puts up his dust as free as day, whenever he's heeled, an' don't mark it down fer a treat back ag'in. He don't ax a man to go, but tells him to come, 'cept when it's rainin' lead so hard that the best o' the lot hes to git in out o' the wet."

"I knowed it!" triumphantly cried Appetite Dandy. "You cain't blow dust in the ole man's eye—not much!"

"Then thar's Buffalo Red," resumed Brocky Bill, taking a fresh supply of breath, and nodding toward Lofty Dick's rival. "I ain't a-sayin' that he's quite as harnsome, nur that he smells quite as sweet as Lofty, fer that would be a stretch-the-truth, an' them sort I don't keep in stock. But I do say that a truer mate never drewed the breath o' life then that same orkward-lookin' rooster! It makes his nose turn a leetle redder, jest to hear his ole side-pardner say as much; but that's a sort o' blush he ain't got no call to be 'shamed of."

"Ef a lad gits into a tight pinch, an' don't see no way to git out o' it, short o' turnin' toes-up, it comes like a whiff o' fresh air would to a pore cuss 'way down in the reddest corner o' the Old Boy's hot-house, to hear the ol' buffler beller, an' see him at his elber, workin' his sixes, or playin' his butcher. An' them's the things that smells louder then posy-stink, an' w'ars longer then fine clo'es!"

"Who said Brocky Bill's head wasn't level?" cried Snapper Johnny, crowing like a bantam and kicking his heels together. "Whooray fer Buffalo Red, the new King o' the Rustlers!"

"Which I reckon it's a center shot, gents," added Brocky Bill, soberly. "Not that I ain't mighty fond o' cake, but tough bull-beef fills a hungry man up quicker, an' stan's by him a heap longer. An' I wotes fer Buffalo Red!"

Loud cheers from the one party; black scowls and ugly mutterings from the other. Despite his implied promise, when matters looked bright for his election, Lofty Dick held himself aloof from the victorious Rustler, and all could see that there was music in the air. Always ready for fun, though it was to be had at the expense of former friends, hands were on the point of moving toward weapons, when a clear, ringing shout came to their startled ears from the level above, and hurriedly turning in that direction, they beheld a remarkable sight.

A horse and rider were distinctly outlined against the bright blue sky. The steed stood on the very edge of the wall, poised upon its hind feet, as though on the point of making a death-leap down to the green valley beneath.

At that distance the rider seemed a perfect counterpart of Lofty Dick, in size, garb and general appearance, save for the fact that the new-comer was as true a brune as he was blonde. Like him, this person wore long, curling hair, with a pair of mustaches so slight as to be hardly visible at that distance. Yet there was one vast difference between them, aside from that of contrasting complexion, and it was indicated by the general exclamation which burst from the lips of the excited Rustlers in the desert sink as recognition came:

"Queen Dixie! Back again! Hurrah!"

With a wave of her gauntleted hand, Queen Dixie wheeled her frothing, travel-stained steed slightly to the right, then gave him free rein, lying far back, until her jetty curls were blended with his flowing tail, as he leaped at break-neck speed down the narrow, curving trail, where a single misstep would hurl them to the bottom together.

A united cheer came from the admiring Rustlers, who seemed to forget their differences in the glorious sight, and still more glorious recklessness of their beautiful queen.

A smile curled her red lips, as the sound came to her ears, for she was acting with a full knowledge of their weaknesses, and knew that

to just such foolhardy actions as these, more than her beauty, did she owe their allegiance.

But there was a frown upon her brow as she reached the level in safety, and dashed into the very midst of the Rustlers before drawing rein, and her voice rung out sharply as she demanded:

"What is the trouble among you wolves, now? Don't deny it. I am not blind. I saw that there was some mischief brewing the moment I set eyes on you. What is it?"

The abashed Rustlers cast shy glances at each other, at this imperious address, but none among them seemed to care to be the one to act as spokesman.

Queen Dixie saw this, and her lovely face flushed hotly. Her riding-whip whistled through the air with a savage cut at vacancy, as she turned to where Lofty Dick stood, his eyes downcast, his handsome countenance moody still.

"You have a tongue, Lofty Dick, and are usually fond enough of hearing it rattle!" she cried, still more sharply than before. "Tell me—I command you, as your lawful queen and mistress! What is the matter? What were you drawn up in two opposing parties for? Speak—and to the point!"

She emphasized the command with another stroke of her whip, the end coming so near his face that Lofty Dick started back with an involuntary raising of one arm, *en garde*.

"We were talking of electing a new chief—"

"In place of whom?" swiftly interjected the woman, her black eyes flashing. "King Saul is your chief, and while he lives, you dare to think of putting another man in his place?"

"Does he still live?" pointedly demanded Lofty Dick, meeting her fiery gaze unflinchingly. "We have just heard that he was captured—that a mob was rising to take him out of the jail where he was confined, and lynch him. Even as the man rode away, he heard a rumpus which he felt sure was the end of King Saul."

"And you were so eager to step into his shoes that you could not wait until the tidings was either confirmed or denied?" flashed the beautiful fury, making her lithe whip quiver, as though longing to lay it fairly over his shoulders.

Lofty Dick gave those shoulders a shrug, as he replied:

"You know how little holds men of our profession together, madam. Without an acknowledged head, they are worth nothing, and half a dozen Rangers or soldiers, could whip the whole outfit. For that reason, as well as to lose no time in setting out on the forlorn hope of rescuing King Saul, we concluded to elect a temporary chief—"

"Unless it should prove the boss was really wiped out; then the election was to stan' fer good an' all. Leastways, that's the light I looked at it," interposed Buffalo Red.

"You two men do all the talking, so I presume you are the most prominent candidates for King Saul's shoes?" uttered Queen Dixie, addressing both, but looking at Lofty Dick.

"Placed in nomination without a word or hint to that effect; at least I can say as much for myself."

"An' you dursen't hint dif'rent as to me!" growled Buffalo Red, with a glance and scowl of surlly defiance.

"I dare more than you can match, old man—"

"Stop!" cried Queen Dixie, spurring her horse between the angry rivals. "Not a word more to that end, or I swear I will send a bullet through the brain of the first to offend. Quarreling like a pack of wolves, when you should be working for the freedom of your chief—for shame!"

Sullenly the rivals withdrew their hands from the weapons which they had grasped, but the black threats still filled their eyes, and the keen sighted woman saw that a collision between them must come, sooner or later, and that it would be all the more deadly from being delayed.

"How far had the matter gone? Which of you two men received the majority of votes?"

"It stood even, 'leven ag'in' 'leven, when Brocky Bill come in an' ther owed his vote fer Buffalo Red," volunteered Appetite Dandy.

"Then I cast my vote in favor of Lofty Dick!" cried the woman, with a triumphant lighting up of her beautiful face. "That makes the voting a tie, and therefore no choice made."

"Ef I might be 'lowed to whisper," whined Brocky Bill, dropping the stick at which he had kept whittling through all until now. "Ef you wouldn't think it a waste o' time to lis'en to the ole man, now, ma'am—"

"Drop that whining, and speak out like a man!" cried Queen Dixie, sharply. "You can if you're a mind. Out with it!"

"Lofty Dick hit the bull's-eye, plum center, he did, now. We cain't do no work 'thout a head, don't yer see, ma'am? Everythin' 'd go flip-flop an' skew-wobble 'um! But 'tain't a man to boost King Saul out o' place, long's he lives. It's one to run the outfit ontel he gits back ag'in—which I'm prayin' monstrous hard 'll be mighty soon—amen!"

He paused through sheer exhaustion of breath, but before Queen Dixie could speak, he added, hastily:

"Nobody knowed whar you was, ur when you'd git back. Which is why I woted fer Buffalo Red. Which ag'in I now changes to you, ma'am. An' I kin lick the man as dar's to wote def'runt!"

A cheer rose from the crowd, but it was instantly quelled by the uplifted hand of Queen Dixie, now less stern.

"Thank you, my good fellows. But I cannot accept, even if I felt sure that I could lead you as you should be led, for I must do my work after a very different fashion. I must hasten back to town at once. I only left to carry the news of King Saul's capture, fearing you would not learn of it until too late to be of service otherwise."

"I had not time to learn positively the manner of his capture, but I heard enough to know that he did not surrender without striking hard and heavy for his freedom. You need not blush for your king!"

"But there is work for you to do, and little time to waste in silly quarrels like the one I just interrupted. King Saul is in jail, ironed hand and foot, treated like a captive lion by the curs who dared not even yelp at his heels while he was at liberty. He may be dead ere this, though I think not. I poured out gold in a flood where I believed it would do the most good, and was solemnly promised that he should be securely guarded against lynching or outside harm, though I could not get him set at liberty."

"I will return, as soon as my horse has had a brief rest, so that he can do the journey. You must follow, and await my instructions. I will find means to see you, or to send you word when and where you are to strike."

"One more point. I am very sorry that this question of King Saul's successor has arisen, just now, when he is in such sore need of every thought, every sympathy, every hand and heart to free him from his deadly peril. At the same time, now that I have had time to grow cooler and to look at the matter more deliberately, I admit the truth of your reasoning. I know that men like us require a hand and head over them. I see that you must have a chief, *pro tem.*, and as your choice seems to be confined to these two gentlemen," turning to Lofty Dick, then to Buffalo Red, she added: "one of them shall hold the office until King Saul returns to relieve him."

"Gentlemen, do you solemnly pledge me your word to do all that lies in your power to set King Saul free? To hold no grudge for the future against the man whom fortune decides shall win in the competition which I am about to propose?"

The two men nodded affirmatively, and she added:

"Good enough! The band shall have a chief in ten minutes!"

CHAPTER XII.

QUEEN DIXIE STOCKS THE CARDS.

THE mutter of growing interest which ran around the circle of eagerly-listening Rustlers, was promptly cut short by their beautiful queen imperiously waving her gauntleted hand.

"Silence, you hungry wolves; I have more to say to these gentlemen, and your yelping disturbs me," she uttered, sharply, then turned again to the rival candidates.

"Are you both willing to abide by my decision?"

"Perfectly," replied Lofty Dick, with a low bow.

"Ef it's a'cordin' to Hoyle, I'll never kick. All I ax is a fa'r shake fer my money," said Buffalo Red, less promptly, he appearing to suspect that the dandy Rustler would meet with more favor in the eyes of their queen than his own weather-beaten carcass.

"If you are defeated you shall have only your evil star to blame," was the swift response.

"But it is not yet too late for either one of you men to retreat. If one of you declines the office before knowing the manner of test which I propose, no one can accuse him of cowardice. Lofty Dick—"

"I'm in the field to stay, if it's all the same to you, madam," coolly interposed the dandy Rustler, refusing to meet her glowing gaze.

"And you, Buffalo Red?"

"I didn't ax fer the persish, nur would I hev took a step to pick it up, ef the boys 'd 'a' made a hint o' what they perposed afore they sprung my name onto me; but now I'm goin' to git thar ef I kin," bluntly declared the outlaw.

"Only one of you can serve as temporary chief, and of course the other must get left. You know how it is as well as I can tell you. The defeated man will have a sore head of the worst kind, and with him will hang a few of his closest friends. Just when we must be drawn the closest together, when we require every particle of strength, wit and self-devotion, there will be bitterest dissension in our midst. Among men of our class, hatred and hard feelings are sure, sooner or later, to find vent in death-blows; and these might come just when the life and free-

dom of King Saul depended upon our perfect concert of action.

"For his sake—the sake of the best man in all the wide land, if he is the husband of the one whose lips sing his praises—I am resolved to decide this dispute so fully that not even the shadow of a ghost shall ever arise from its tomb!"

"You two gentlemen have agreed to abide by the result, and it only remains to ask the same of your adherents. You have heard my words, boys. What do you say? Will you follow the man whom fate elects as your chief during the absence of King Saul, regardless of the fact that he may be the one against whom you voted at first? Speak out and clearly."

"A man wouldn't be no man, but a durned hog, ef he'd dar' ax anythin' fa'r'er then that!" whined Brocky Bill.

Though less explicit, as a rule, one and all of the Rustlers gave in their approval of their queen's decision, and a vivid glitter came into her eyes, as she knew that her point was gained beyond all doubt.

"Good enough! It is too late now for either of the candidates to retreat, even should they wish to do so. They must abide the decision of fate, and I will be her handmaiden!"

With a clear, metallic laugh, Queen Dixie touched her horse with the spur, and galloped around the little pond to the adobe house, where she leaped from the saddle and turned the jaded animal loose to graze and satisfy its thirst. With one backward glance at the Rustlers, she opened the vine-hidden door, and entered the building.

During her absence, which was not greatly prolonged, the outlaws gathered in little knots, conversing together in low, guarded tones, casting frequent glances of curiosity toward the rivals, each standing alone, quietly awaiting the result of the unfortunate dispute.

"One o' them two hes got one foot into his grave, with t'other hoof follerin' it monstrous cluss, now, do 'ee mind?" whined Brocky Bill, picking up the stick which he had lately cast aside, and resuming his whittling. "It's a heap pity, too, when ye think what onmarciful fighters they both be; now ain't it, eh? But Queen Dixie said mighty right: 'twouldn't be many breaths afore they'd be at each other's thrapples in bull-dog airnest, taking thar heelers with 'em, an' it's better that one man go under, then to plant a dozen—now ain't it, eh?"

"Ef it comes to a squar' fight, I'm layin' my ducats on Buffalo Red fer the top keerd," supplemented Snapper Johnny.

"Which I'm a-callin' all sech fool bluffs as them," came promptly from Appetite Dandy, as he pulled out a buckskin bag. "Put up or shet up—money talks!"

The challenge was promptly accepted, and betting on one or the other of the rivals, the Rustlers drew eagerly together, shaking their money in each other's faces, talking loudly, for the moment forgetting the near proximity of the two men on whose chances for life or death they were gambling.

Cool and unnerved, Buffalo Red watched and listened, but Lofty Dick was more impulsive, and as Snapper Johnny became a little too eager in his clamoring for takers against his favorite, the Dandy Rustler stepped forward, with a smile:

"I don't care about winning your cash, Snapper, but it's a pity to see so good a man wasting his breath. Count out your pile, and I'll cover it. Borrow what you can raise, or make a pool, if you wish—"

"Stay with him, mate!" growled Buffalo Red, tossing a well-filled shot-sack over to his henchman.

Lofty Dick turned to make a hot retort, but he caught sight of Queen Dixie emerging from the adobe building, and hurriedly passing his purse to Appetite Dandy, he resumed his former station and lapsed into silence.

"Gentlemen, if either of you have thought better of your decision, a word will suffice. Silence? All right!" and a cold laugh came through her red-ripe lips, as she brought both hands before her, each one clasping a derringer of heavy caliber, the short barrel of each having a circular bit of white paper pasted over the muzzle, so that the keenest eye could not look down the hollow tubes.

"Just one word. You are both good men. Both noble Rustlers, whose loss will be deeply regretted by us, your comrades, and no less sincerely rejoiced in by all honest citizens. And yet one of you has got to turn toes-up for good and all!"

"You know the reason, quite as well as I, so there is no necessity for dwelling longer on that point. With both alive, we would be in hot water constantly. With one in the grave, the other will be chief, until King Saul comes back to claim his shoes again, and to him will be given the allegiance which would be divided between two."

"You are dead shots, both. Were I to permit you to meet in a regular duel, you both would die, and thus we would suffer a double loss. That we cannot afford, and hence the lucky one will be selected by fate herself. Are you willing?"

Both men nodded, but neither spoke. The Rustlers crowded around, eying first the woman, then the men, their glances finally riveted upon the curiously masked derringers.

"Before I state the conditions of the lottery," added Queen Dixie, speaking as lightly and sweetly as though she was proposing some simple amusement, instead of pronouncing the death-doom of a fellow-being; "you will submit to being disarmed. Snapper Johnny, you will see that Lofty Dick is left without any weapons. And you, Appetite Dandy, oblige me by searching Buffalo Red."

It was evident to all that Queen Dixie had not selected her tools blindly, but meant that nothing should interfere with her scheme. And a murmur of approval ran around the circle. While each man had his favorite, they were ready to accept the decree of fate or chance, provided all was conducted on the square.

"Now, gentlemen," added Queen Dixie, as the searchers fell back with the weapons taken from the persons of the rival candidates; "to business. You see these pistols? They are tools selected for clean work at close quarters, by King Saul himself. Each one has but a single barrel. One is loaded, the other contains simply an empty cartridge-shell, from which I have just extracted all but the cap. You see I have covered each muzzle with paper, to prevent your discovering how fate has favored you, by a sly glance down the short tube before you pull trigger. You can toss a coin for first choice—"

"Age before beauty," interrupted Lofty Dick, with a short and hard laugh. "Give him the first pick, and he'll have the satisfaction of knowing that he sealed his own doom."

"So be it!" echoed Queen Dixie, stepping toward Buffalo Red and extending the weapons. "Take your choice, my good fellow, and may fortune give you your just deserts."

Without looking at the weapons, the grim old Rustler thrust out his hand and took the first derringer which met his grasp, then suffered the tool to hang by his side.

"The other one falls to you, of course," added Queen Dixie, turning to Lofty Dick.

She stepped aside as he took the weapon, and spoke:

"I pledge you both my word and honor that I have not the ghost of an idea which one of you two holds the weapon with powder and ball instead of the empty shell, nor do I care one farthing. Thanks to your own folly, one of you must die. We will regret his fate when we have more leisure time."

"All that remains for me is to explain the terms of the duel, and those are very simple. You will separate ten paces, and when I give the word you can fire or not, standing or advancing, according to pleasure; but if the nerve of either so fails him that he dares not pull trigger, the other shall be at liberty to shoot, or give him his life, as he thinks best."

"To your stations. Are you ready? Then *git thar, Eli!*"

For a single instant neither of the two men made a motion either to raise their weapons or to advance, and a black frown began to contract the brow of Queen Dixie; but this vanished in a wicked smile, as Lofty Dick took a step in advance, promptly imitated by his grim rival.

With pistols tightly grasped, but still hanging at their sides, the duelists slowly drew closer together, until their feet almost touched each other, their eyes gazing steadily into each other, not a trace of fear to be detected in either countenance, though neither knew which one fate had doomed to fall, unavenged.

A more crucial ordeal could scarcely have been invented, and despite the intense interest with which they awaited the end, the Rustlers gave a low, husky mutter of grim approval. If the nerve and pluck of either man had ever been doubted, their conduct now would have dissipated all such forever.

Breast to breast they stood, not a visible trace of emotion to be read in either countenance, but with their eyes doing desperate battle, each one striving to cow the other and gain a preliminary triumph; but this was time spent in vain. A more superb exhibition of "pure sand" was never witnessed.

"Time!" impatiently cried Queen Dixie, as the duel of eyes gave no sign of coming to an end. "Are you both afraid to make another move?"

Lofty Dick raised his pistol and rested its muzzle against the temple of his rival. Buffalo Red imitated his action, and thus they stood for a moment, their eyes glaring into each other across the tubes. Then—

At the muffled report, both men staggered back, and a wild cry arose from the Rustlers, as they fancied that, through some terrible mistake, both duelists had met their death.

But then Lofty Dick straightened up, with a short laugh, as he beheld Buffalo Red fall backward, his skull literally blown to atoms. Upon his own temple, there was a blackened circle, but it only came from the exploded primer.

"Long live Lofty Dick, King of the Rustlers, until our rightful sovereign returns!" cried

Queen Dixie, waving a white handkerchief over her head as she glided forward and clasped the successful candidate by the hand.

"Are you satisfied, gentlemen?" she added, turning sharply toward the Rustlers, who seemed stupefied by the result.

Out rung the voice of Appetite Dandy, and quickly following came the others. The spell was broken. For the moment Buffalo Red was forgotten. They had eyes, ears, tongues only for their newly elected chief, and flocking around him, were all eager to clasp his hand, even those who had lost their last dollar in backing the dead man.

"Enough of this!" said Queen Dixie, impatiently waving them aside. "We have already lost too much time, when the life and liberty of King Saul may hang on the loss or gain of a single minute. Look to the corpse. Buffalo Red was a good man, and deserves an honest burial. Poor fellow!" with a low sigh, as she gazed regretfully down upon the horrid mutilation. "I do not know but that his fate is the most happy one, after all is said and done!"

"No doubt you would prefer to see me lying in his place, uttered Lofty Dick, with a faintly disguised sneer. "I am sorry for your sake, even while rejoicing for my own, that fate played the good fellow such a scurvy trick—"

"Enough!" with a haughty air. "Look to the body, men. You come with me, Lofty Dick. I wish to give you your orders, before I take the saddle again."

Gliding swiftly away, Queen Dixie passed around the pond, casting a single glance over her shoulder as though to make sure that the newly elected chief was following her.

Neither spoke, until near the wall of earth at the base of the winding trail down which the Amazon had ridden half an hour before. Then she turned upon him, drawing something from the bosom of her frilled shirt, and guardedly showing it to him.

"What is that, Lofty Dick?" she demanded, her voice hard and unnatural, her black eyes gleaming vividly.

The handsome face of the dandy Rustler turned a shade paler, as he glanced first at the object, then into her eyes.

It was a derringer, the exact copy of those which had been used in the duel, even to the bit of white paper fastened over the muzzle.

Tearing off this paper, Queen Dixie chewed it to a pulp, then swallowed it. While thus occupied, she broke the weapon and extracted a shell, holding it before Lofty Dick so that he could see it clearly. The ball and powder had been extracted without being discharged, for the primer was intact.

"You begin to see into the mystery, you silly boy!" she uttered, with a low, sweet laugh, as she threw away the empty shell and replaced the pistol in her bosom. "Did you for a moment imagine that I would suffer you to risk your life against that of Buffalo Red, good man though the poor devil undoubtedly was?"

Lofty Dick looked into her face with a puzzled air.

"But how? I don't understand!"

"Simple enough, with one who owns fingers as nimble and adroit as mine. When I held out these weapons for Buffalo—"

"But suppose he had not accepted my proposal? Suppose we had tossed, and I lost, or won, the first choice?"

With a soft laugh the woman drew a coin from her pocket. It closely resembled a twenty-dollar coin, but there was a head on both sides, instead of only one.

"You could not have won first choice, my dear. Had you called heads, I would have changed this coin for another, with tails on both sides. Now do you comprehend?"

"That you meant Buffalo Red to have first choice, but I was watching you closely, and I could swear that you gave me the second of the two pistols which you held out at first."

"Then you would perjure yourself, Dicky-boy. I made the pass, for all that, and the result is that you are our chief—my king—"

"Until that infernal Spitfire comes back!" muttered the dandy Rustler, with a savage scowl and grating curse.

"Which will never be, unless the grave gives up its dead—and I've little terror of ghosts!" uttered Queen Dixie, a bright smile playing over her lovely features.

"Then it is true?" eagerly asked Lofty Dick. "All our plans worked well? He was captured—killed?"

"The first, not the last. Nothing short of a rope can cut off his wind, or he would have turned toes-up without all this trouble and aggravation. He was taken by surprise, just as I plotted he should be, but his infernal luck still stood by him, though he received blows enough to kill a dozen decent men. He was overpowered, and taken to town. They put him into jail, and there he would be at this moment, only for me."

"What do you mean?" demanded Lofty Dick, his eyes filled with a startling doubt, for despite his wonderful courage, he feared this King Saul, quite as much as he hated him.

Queen Dixie made no immediate reply, for her restless eyes told her that there was danger

of being overheard by the party of Rustlers who were drawing near, bearing between them the corpse of luckless Buffalo Red, victim of shameless treachery on the part of one in whom he had placed the most unlimited confidence, holding himself ready to die in her behalf, day or night, should the occasion ever arise.

"The fools are coming to bury him by the side of his old mate," she whispered, with a side glance toward a rude grave near the foot of the trail. "We will go up to the top, and I will be seeming to show you your course, while we say what we must, to have a perfect understanding."

She led the way up the trail, pausing when the level was reached, then seated herself so that she could command a full view of all below, motioning Lofty Dick to seat himself beside her; but he refused, saying in explanation:

"We must be more guarded. If the boys should suspect the truth, our lives would be snuffed out as swiftly as was that of Buffalo Red. It's a big stake we're playing for, pet, and to win we must not throw away a card."

"You are right, Dick. Time enough for billing and cooing when that devil is surely planted—"

"Then he was not lynched?" asked Lofty Dick, anxiously.

"Not when I left town, but the odds are all against his being alive now," was the heartless response. "I played my part to perfection, and not a soul suspected me of being other than what I appeared on the surface: a Mexican, who had sworn to know no rest until the ruthless slayer of his brother and father was brought to the death-rope. Ha! ha! They little thought that it was Queen Dixie, wife of King Saul, whom they had in their power, else there would have been a second rope knotted for my pretty throat—"

"But King Saul?" impatiently repeated Lofty Dick.

"Is dead, long ere this, else there's no virtue in gold. I poured it out like water, and set the fire, before I left. I thought it best to guard every point, and satisfied that they would be too late to effect anything, I hastened here to set the Rustlers afoot—"

She paused abruptly, a look of horror coming over her face, as she pointed over the level desert, hoarsely gasping:

"Merciful father! look yonder! We are lost!"

CHAPTER XIII.

MORE TRIBULATION FOR GENTEEL GUY.

WHEN he beheld the man who had so thoroughly outwitted and overpowered him, riding away toward the Debonay ranch, Genteel Guy almost suffocated with impotent rage and vain longings for vengeance. He had no room for feeling grateful to Dame Fortune for having spared his life in that lottery of death. If the thought occurred to him at all, it only served to deepen his fierce rage against Fred Bloodgood, or Windy Jess, as he more firmly than ever believed that loquacious worthy.

With savage fury he tugged at his bonds, vainly striving to burst or stretch them sufficiently to enable him to free his limbs, first his arms, then his feet. A moment's reflection would have been sufficient to convince him of the folly of such hopes, for the lasso, tough, pliable, but unyielding, was wrapped in coils around his body, from his shoulders down to his ankles, the ends twisted and knotted together with diabolical skill. Even had his hands been left at liberty, with the knots before his eyes and within easy reach, it would have been the work of many minutes for his unarmed fingers to untie those greased complications; behind his back, it was impossible.

But Genteel Guy was in no condition for reasoning just then. Proud, high-spirited, entertaining a very tidy idea of his address and keenness of wit, the thought of his easy defeat was worse than gall on his tongue, and it was not until he had almost utterly exhausted his bodily powers in wrestling with the unyielding lasso, that he began to realize how very foolishly he was acting.

Panting for breath, quivering in every fiber from his terrible struggle against fate, bathed in sweat as the blazing sun poured its rays upon him, the tall grass shutting off all of the feeble breeze, Genteel Guy lay between those two huge land-waves, in anything but an enviable state of mind.

He knew now that his first suspicions were correct, that Fred Bloodgood was none other than the notorious Windy Jess, a prominent member of the Rustlers, and one of Spitfire Saul's right-hand men. That he was in this region at all amply proved that he meant mischief, while the fact of his being in such cunning disguise, only increased the peril of those against whom he was plotting, while it lessened the chances of his own detection before the blow which he contemplated was dealt.

"If I was only free! If Mark Boyd would only strike the ranch before that cursed hound gets in his work! I'd gladly give a hand to foil

his schemes—to close my fingers on his lying throat just once!”

In gasping breaths these sentences rose in his throat, there to be smothered by the unyielding gag, but they were written in letters of fire upon his brain.

Every minute was an age of torture to him as he lay there so helpless. His brain tortured him worse than the rope or the gash through his scalp, or the heat of the blazing sun.

In his mad love for the beautiful daughter of his employer, he could connect the devilish schemes of Windy Jess with none other. His plots were all against her. Taking advantage of having been of service to them, he would be introduced to Pierre Debonay by the two maidens; the ranchero would receive him courteously, thank him politely, then turn him over to Lucille for entertainment, while he again buried himself with his books. And then?

Genteel Guy groaned aloud in bitter agony as he pictured the rest, his boiling brain fancying he beheld the bold outlaw stealing away his treasure, riding madly over the desert through the night, clasping her tightly to his bosom, whispering vile taunts in her horror-stricken ears, bearing her away to—what?

Tortured almost to madness by the horrible visions which rose before him, Genteel Guy rolled over and over, dashing his face and skull against the ground as he vainly strove to burst his bonds. Then—a hoarse, choking cry escaped his lips, as the thong which held the gag in place, broke and let the wad of buckskin-covered grass drop from his aching jaws.

This was a most fortunate incident. Only for that, the chances are that the young foreman would have gone mad, or have suffered a sunstroke before his desperate struggles came to an end. That free, full breath of air, coming just when he was almost suffocating, acted like a douche of cool water on an overheated brain, and Genteel Guy lay on his side, inhaling the grateful air, rapidly becoming his usual self.

“What an infernal idiot I have shown myself, from first to last!” he muttered in tones of utter disgust. “Have I altogether lost my wits, since that black rascal stepped upon the scene? It looks like it! Every step a false one—and why? Because I was a fool, and fancied I saw something in her eyes as I lifted her upon my horse, to be sure of which I would give my life without a murmur!”

For a few minutes he lay without motion, his blue eyes all aglow, the hot blood leaping through his veins as he recalled that glance, as he once more sought to read the joyous tidings which he had fancied—was it only fancy—he read in her glorious black orbs as he rescued her from almost certain death, that day.

Then, like an evil cloud, the handsome face of the man who had outwitted him, came between, and the bright dream vanished to give place to stern reality.

“While I’m lying here idle, that cursed fiend is hard at work!” he muttered, scowling angrily as he glanced down at the tightly drawn coils of rawhide. “Am I helpless? Is there nothing I can do? No way of getting out of this scrape, in time to foil his plans? If Mark would only chance along—Ha!”

With a quick exertion of his hampered limbs and muscles, Genteel Guy raised himself to a sitting posture, and glanced eagerly around him, only to have the eager light fade from his eyes, as nothing save the dreary waste of grass and an occasional stunted shrub, met his searching gaze.

Until that moment, he had failed to realize his precise situation, but now he saw how cunningly Windy Jess had timed his assault, to leave him a prisoner, just where there was the least probability of his being discovered by any person going to or coming from the Debonay ranch.

Behind and before him rose the twin slopes, each one making a gentle curve toward each other, and uniting into one, not many rods above and below where he now found himself, thus forming a miniature valley, less than a quarter of a mile long, by only a few yards in width. Unless some one should cross that valley, he would remain undiscovered, without he could make his voice heard; and as that idea occurred to him, Genteel Guy raised his voice in a shrill, prolonged yell.

“If I was only up there on the crest!” he muttered, after the lapse of a few minutes, thus employed. “But how? Can it be done? Let me think!”

With knitted brows, he pondered over the difficult problem, wild fancies flocking through his heated brain, only to be discarded as worse than hopeless. But then the perplexed frown vanished, and an inarticulate cry escaped his lips.

Shifting his position, so that he would have the advantage of what little slope there was, he essayed to raise himself upon his feet. It was no slight task, for his ankles were bound together so tightly that they had not the slightest room for play, and more than once he fell heavily back, just as success seemed about to reward his persistent efforts, but still he would not admit defeat, and tried again and again,

until he stood erect, his body swaying swiftly from side to side as he sought to gain and preserve his equilibrium.

At length he succeeded, though it was a terrible strain upon his cramped muscles, but then came the most difficult part of his forlorn hope.

The crest nearest the Debonay ranch was considerably the highest, and he knew that should he once succeed in gaining it, he would secure an uninterrupted view of the surrounding country for a goodly distance on either side. Unfortunately his face was turned in the opposite direction, as the ground upon which he stood, sloped slightly that way, and he had taken advantage of that fact, thinking only of securing his perpendicularity once more. This he had at length obtained, but now he must face around and attempt to gain the crest.

With every muscle painfully strained, Genteel Guy made the attempt, on which he felt that so much depended, bending his knees slightly and making little jumps, of only a few inch spans, gradually turning himself about, until his face was toward the longed-for crest, which looked, oh! so terribly far away, as he began to realize the full nature of the task he had set himself about accomplishing.

For the first few yards, though trying and straining enough on his hampered muscles, the task did not appear so hopeless, but with each succeeding jump, Genteel Guy felt his hopes steadily ebbing. It would have been bad enough had the feat been set for level ground, devoid of all obstacles; but here, on rising ground, with the coarse grass growing fully to the height of his knees, with many an inequality in the surface, trifling when considered by any ordinary pedestrian, but terribly trying for one in his condition to surmount, the test was wholly beyond the power of mortal man to accomplish.

Genteel Guy doggedly stuck to his self-appointed task, jumping more and more rapidly as he felt the difficulty of maintaining his balance increasing, great drops of perspiration dropping from his face, his breath coming in short, quick fiery gasps. The coarse grass tangled itself around his ankles, more than once nearly casting him headlong, the young man only saving himself from an ugly fall by a series of tremendous efforts that rapidly sapped his powers.

The coils of rawhide appeared to grow tighter and tighter, eating into the unnaturally-strained muscles of his legs, threatening to cut short the circulation; but against all these the young foreman struggled and fought, as he had never before given battle in all his life.

It was not to be, however. A knot of grass tangled itself around his ankles, and though Genteel Guy fought desperately to keep his footing, he fell heavily over sideways, the shock almost stunning him. A gasping groan escaped his lips, as he felt himself rolling over and over, rapidly losing the ground he had so hardly gained, but absolutely without the power to remedy the evil. His brain whirled and spun around, strange noises filling his skull, lurid flashes of light blinding his aching eyes—it seemed as though he was going mad.

When he once more lifted his head, Genteel Guy uttered a gasping curse of utter despair, for he saw that he was still nearer the bottom of the slope than he had been when he first began that terrible fight against fate. Worse than that, he knew from the dull, lifeless sensation when he attempted to draw up his legs that they would require long and perfect rest before they could repeat the task of jumping up the hill.

“It will be too late then!” he groaned, closing his eyes in sullen despair. “Even when I can try it again, what good? No man on earth could keep going until the top was reached, and to pause means to fall—then another roll—Ha!”

Genteel Guy sat up as suddenly as though a secret spring had been touched by some cunning finger, and glared around him, his eyes flashing with renewed hope. If he could roll one way, despite his most strenuous efforts to check his progress, might it not be possible for him to roll the other?

Slewing himself around so that he would lie at right angles to the course he must pursue, Genteel Guy flung himself backward, and rolled over and over, a hoarse cry of triumph escaping his parched lips; for he felt that the troublesome enigma was solved at last!

With frequent pauses for breath, to rest his painfully tasked muscles, and to correct his course, the young foreman worked on, slowly but surely nearing the goal. It was killing work, bound so tightly, rolling up hill, tangled in the coarse grass, but he had gained wisdom from his former failure, and whenever he felt his powers failing, he wisely paused to rest, lying on his back and grasping a bunch of grass, to keep himself from rolling down again, then renewing his upward way.

It was frightful work. Had only his life depended upon the result, Genteel Guy would have ceased the struggle, long before success rewarded him; but he thought of Lucille Debonay, whom he believed threatened by Windy Jess, and that reflection, with his great love, lent him the requisite powers to accomplish the tremendous feat.

His brain almost bursting, his parched and swollen tongue hanging out of his cracked and bleeding lips, his body aching in every fiber, quivering as with a palsy, Genteel Guy lay on the crest of the land-wave, absolutely exhausted for many minutes, though he knew that even then his main hope—the coming of Mark Boyd—might be escaping him through this terrible inertness.

Then, with a desperate effort, the young man raised himself to a sitting posture, and swept his eyes around over the wide expanse thus presented to his view. A hoarse, inarticulate cry gurgled up in his throat, as he tried to wave his hand, forgetting that they were helpless—then his powers failed him, just when he felt that he needed them most; for there, not five score yards away, rode the Ranger lieutenant, Mark Boyd!

Though he knew it not, Genteel Guy had been seen and recognized in that brief moment by his friend, who galloped rapidly to his side, and leaping from the saddle, cut the cruel coils of rawhide, his face sternly pale and hard-set as he began to realize what terrible torture his friend must have endured, to score his handsome face so deeply.

“Who did it? What for?” hurriedly uttered the Ranger, as Genteel Guy opened his blood-shot eyes and pushed away the brandy-flask. “Tell me by signs, if you can’t speak!”

“Windy Jess—gone to ranch—evil to girls—quick!”

Faint and incoherent as were these broken sentences, they were sufficient for the keen-witted Ranger, and without losing any more time, he raised the body of his friend in his powerful arms, and placed it in the saddle, hastily binding it fast to the high pommel with a piece of the severed lasso, the better to guard against a fall while he was mounting behind.

Then supporting Genteel Guy with his arms as he grasped the reins, Mark Boyd plied spur and dashed away toward the Debonay ranch, anxiously questioning his friend as they rode.

His limbs set at liberty, with the motion of the horse and the strength of the brandy setting his blood in circulation, Genteel Guy was rapidly recovering his strength of mind and body, and long ere they came in sight of the ranch, he had given the Ranger a pretty accurate idea of how matters stood.

Then, as they rose an abrupt slope which had for some time shut off their view of the ranch and its immediate surroundings, Genteel Guy uttered a cry of hot anger, crying:

“Yonder! by the Lord of Israel! it’s the bound himself!”

Nearly half a mile away, they beheld a single horseman, going from them at a steady gallop; but had the distance been double what it was, the eye of hatred would not have mistaken its man, and with a grating curse, Genteel Guy snatched the Sharp’s rifle from its sling, and leaping to the ground, rested his left elbow upon his knee, taking quick but steady aim, sending the hissing bolt over the plain in quest of the life of his bitter foe.

A sharp curse almost blistered his lips as he saw that his aim had failed him, and he cried:

“Follow the dog, Boyd! Take him, dead or alive! He’s only armed with pistols. I’ll try to cripple his horse. Quick!”

Not for an instant did the gallant Ranger hesitate, but pricking his spirited steed sharply with the spurs, he thundered away in pursuit, while Genteel Guy, manipulating the long-range rifle as swiftly as possible, sent bolt after bolt whistling and humming through space, his rage growing hotter and more fierce, as he saw the outlaw racing steadily away, the tiny dust-clouds rising behind, before, to either side of him, as the leaden missiles sped innocuously on their way.

This very rage, his intense longing to bring down either horse or rider, killed or disabled, probably foiled the hopes of the marksman, for under ordinary circumstances, he would hardly have wasted a second bullet, over ground with which he was so thoroughly familiar, where he could guess the distance of his target within a few yards.

Keeping a little to one side, so as not to interfere with the aim of his friend, Mark Boyd rode on at full speed, intent on gauging the respective powers of their animals, and before he had covered half a mile, he uttered a little laugh of exultation, for he could see that he was gaining rapidly upon the fleeing outlaw, who, judging from his frequent backward glances, was growing uneasy as to the result.

On for another mile, when the intervening distance was cut down to a scant hundred yards, and the Ranger was beginning to think of putting a speedy end to the chase by using his revolvers, when he beheld the outlaw draw rein and abruptly leap to the ground, at the same time turning his horse broadside on, as though to provide himself with a breastwork.

With a wild yell, the lieutenant charged, drawing his pistols, but before he could use them, a spout of flame-tinged smoke shot out from under the neck of the Rustler’s horse, and with a spasmodic bound he felt his steed falling.

It came so suddenly that he had scarce time to free his feet from the stirrups. Then he was

hurled headlong over the head of his death-stricken horse, striking the ground with terrible force, rolling over and over, then lying in a bleeding, quivering heap.

Nearly half an hour had elapsed when he recovered his senses, to find himself alone, with not another soul in sight. Bewildered he stared around him, mechanically feeling for his weapons—but they were missing.

He remembered then what had occurred, and scrambled to his feet, an oath of mingled anger and wonder breaking from his lips as he caught sight of a scrap of paper which some hand had pinned to his breast while he lay unconscious.

He tore it from its frail fastening, and read:

"GALLANT LIEUTENANT:—You came out for wool, and will return shorn. I would kill you, even as you would slaughter me, did I lay as helpless at your feet, but that I know you will feel this sort of revenge even more bitterly. I content myself with taking your weapons. When you wish to redeem them, call on Yours, to command."

"FRED BLOODGOOD, alias WINDY JESS."

The outlaw had judged truly. Those words were very bitter for the Ranger to swallow. It may be doubted whether he would not have chosen death itself in preference, had he been given the option. Defeat alone would not have been so hard to bear, but this was adding insult to injury. Disarmed, his life spared through seeming contempt; that was bitterest of all. And he took an oath to never know rest until he had wiped out the insult with the heart's blood of his foe.

Stiff and sore from his bruises, Mark Boyd removed the equipage from his dead steed, and with it slung across his shoulders, set out along the back trail leading to the ranch.

As he neared his destination, he saw a little knot of the cowboys who were employed on the ranch, seemingly listening to something that was going on within doors. As they observed his approach, several of them hastened to meet him, with eager countenances, but before they could speak, he cried:

"Catch me up the best horse you can find, and half a dozen of you prepare for a hard ride. That infernal Windy Jess wants to be taken into camp—"

"Then it was him?" eagerly cut in one of the cowboys. "But you go in thar—Genteel Guy is in trouble—"

Mark Boyd waited for no more, but casting his saddle and bridle toward the speaker, he hastened into the building, to witness a peculiarly exciting scene.

The troubles and tribulations of Genteel Guy did not end with the discovery of Windy Jess seeking safety in flight.

As he saw that his hated foe had escaped his hasty shots and was now beyond range, his overtaken brain gave way for the time being, and he sunk down amid the grass clumps, in something very like a swoon.

How long he lay thus, he never knew, but when his senses began to return, he staggered to his feet, his sudden appearance startling the cowboys who had been drawn to the vicinity by the rapid rattle of firearms, without being able to discover what occasioned the alarm.

Scarce pausing to reply to their eager queries, Genteel Guy hastened into the house, startling the two girls and the new-found heir, with his abrupt entrance and disordered looks.

So overjoyed was he to behold Lucille, safe after all the terrible calamities his tortured brain had pictured, while lying helpless in the desert, that now he started toward her with a glad cry, his hands outstretched, his blood-shot eyes glowing; only to recoil, as the startled maiden shrunk away, her face turning very pale as she motioned him to forbear.

"I—your father—where is he, Miss Debonay?" he stammered, scarce conscious of what he said, but mechanically moving toward the room where instinct told him the ranchero was to be found at all hours of the day.

"For shame, Lu!" whispered Ora, sharply, from where she lay on the couch, her blue eyes flashing indignantly.

"The fellow is drunk!" muttered Lucien Debonay, his dark face very pale, but with an indignant light filling his lustrous eyes as he stepped before his shrinking sister.

Genteel Guy heard neither of them, saw nothing of their actions. Indeed, it may well be doubted whether he knew the presence of the youth whom Windy Jess had introduced as his brother, at all.

Like a man in a waking dream, or under the influence of strong liquor, he opened the door of the room in which Pierre Debonay sat, his face buried in his hands, pondering over the strange and terrible story which Windy Jess, as Fred Bloodgood, had poured into his startled ears. For this purpose, he had sent the youth out to rejoin the women, that there might nothing interfere with his whirling, dizzied brain; and now he looked up with a frown, as Genteel Guy staggered across the threshold, his clothes torn, his face stained with blood and dust, very unlike his usual trim, neat self.

"I did nothing. Why are you here?" sharply demanded the ranchero. "Leave me—I wish to be alone!"

This address, so sharp, so unlike what he had

ever experienced before in his intercourse with his employer, acted like a sudden douche of ice-water on the young man, clearing away the whirling mists, and enabling him to speak coherently and straight to the point.

In swift speech, he related the more prominent events of that afternoon, regardless of the black frowns and sharp exclamations with which the ranchero sought to interrupt him.

"I can swear to his identity, if necessary, though he is so cunningly disguised," he added. "He has deserved death a thousand times over, and with your permission, I will set out in pursuit of him at once, taking with me enough of the hands to make sure of holding our own, should the cunning rascal have any of his fellow cutthroats lurking near."

"You will do no such thing, Mr. Abbey," said Pierre Debonay, rising from his chair, and moving toward the door. "You are in my employ, I believe, and therefore subject to my orders. You will oblige me by returning to your proper business at once, and letting this affair drop just where it is."

Confused, bewildered, the foreman followed his employer from the room into the apartment where the young people were congregated. The sight of Lucille's pale countenance recalled to Genteel Guy's memory, the insulting speeches of the outlaw when he had him helplessly bound and at his mercy, and gave him the courage to add:

"You surely do not understand, Mr. Debonay! I tell you that fellow is the very outlaw who—"

He paused abruptly, staring at the youth, who stood beside the couch on which Ora rested, gazing coldly into his face.

"And there's his partner!" Genteel Guy suddenly cried, pointing with quivering finger at the youth. "His brother, that infernal villain said! What is he doing here?"

"You forget yourself, Mr. Abbey," said Pierre Debonay, icily. "That gentleman is my son."

Little cries of wonder broke from three pairs of lips, and the newly-found heir was the center of as many widely-opened eyes. Pale as death, but showing no other trace of emotion, he drew his slight form erect, giving back the surprised stare of Genteel Guy with a dangerous glitter in his dark orbs, that plainly spoke of both hatred and defiance.

"Your son?" slowly uttered the foreman. "Yet he was in friendly company with that scoundrelly cutthroat and robber! Windy Jess introduced him as his brother—I can not understand it at all!"

"I do not pry you to understand it, Mr. Abbey, but to overlook my men, and see that all goes well with the stock. You will please confine yourself to those duties."

Genteel Guy drew himself up stiffly, bowing low, then said:

"I will try and remember, Mr. Debonay. But a part of my duty consists in guarding your property against cunning plotters, and with your permission, I will set out in pursuit of this thieving Rustler—"

"You will do no such thing, sir!" hotly cried the ranchero. "I absolutely forbid you taking the men from their duties to join in any such wild-goose chase—"

"Then I will take the trail alone, and—"

"That, also, I distinctly forbid. Return to your duty, sir! That man will not trouble the stock."

"Mr. Debonay," said Genteel Guy, curbing his hot passions and speaking slowly, deliberately; "I believe I have served you faithfully, ever since I entered your employ. You never had to utter an order or word a request the second time. I knew my place, and I have religiously kept it. Am I right?"

"Until now—yes. I have no complaint to make."

"This rascal, Windy Jess, as I am prepared to take my oath he is, though so cunningly disguised, took me off my guard, and knocked me senseless from behind. When I recovered, it was to find myself bound hand and foot, disarmed, wholly at the mercy of a malicious bloodhound."

"He taunted me as I lay thus, with his schemes for the future. He spoke of your daughter in terms which I care not to repeat. Knowing him by reputation, you can, perhaps, imagine something of what he said. He offered me my freedom, if I would pledge my honor to remain away from the ranch until to-morrow morning, to keep silence concerning all that had happened, to give neither word nor sign which could interfere with his plans. I refused, of course. Then he tossed up a coin to see whether he should cut my throat, or simply leave me hidden there in the grass, to live or die, as chance might determine. He *did* toss up, and fate decreed that I was to escape his knife. Then he left me, with still more biting taunts."

"I have told you as nearly as I care to, in the presence of the ladies, what passed between us. Now, knowing all that I have suffered from this cowardly villain, do you persist in refusing me permission to follow him?"

"If you follow him, you are no longer servant of mine," coldly responded the ranchero.

"Good enough!" cried Genteel Guy, his eyes flashing, his graceful form drawn erect. "You have said it! I am no longer a servant of yours, and now I tell you that I *will* take the trail of this wretch, and never return until either he or I have drawn the last breath of life!"

"Stop!" cried Lucien, springing forward as Genteel Guy was turning on his heel. "You have something else to answer for before you run away. You have insulted me, by inference, if not in plain words. You shall fight me, or I'll—"

The hand of the ranchero fell upon his shoulder.

"You are my son, Lucien, and I forbid your disgracing yourself by fighting a discharged servant—"

Another interruption, another speech cut short.

This time the one who interfered was Lucille. Powerfully agitated, she had listened to the swift interchange of words with steadily increasing excitement. Despite his ragged attire, his bruised and stained countenance, she felt that Genteel Guy had never before looked so handsome, so utterly a man, as now, and it hardly required the murmur of indignation which came to her from the loyal-hearted, impulsive Ora, to break down all barriers of maidenly reserve and false delicacy. She darted forward, and standing between the two men and her king, she clasped one arm around his neck, crying:

"This for their bitter insults, my king, my love!" and her red, ripe lips were passionately pressed to his, then as swiftly withdrawn, to utter: "I love you—love you better than life itself! And by that love, I beseech you to go—go without resenting their taunts, for remember, with all his faults, he is my father!"

For a moment the two men were so utterly astounded that they could neither speak nor move, but then, with cries of hot rage, they leaped forward, Pierre Debonay grasping Lucille and dragging her away, but Lucien, knife in hand, aiming a vicious blow at the heart of the foreman.

Ere the weapon could touch his breast, Genteel Guy caught the descending wrist, giving it a wrench that caused the bones to crack, then hurled the mad youth aside.

It was at this moment that Mark Boyd entered, and taking in the details at a glance, he caught his friend and forcibly dragged him from the room; but in Genteel Guy's ears rung the joyous words coming from Lucille's lips:

"I love you! Never forget, my darling—my king!"

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW KING SAUL CAME HOME AGAIN.

WITH their heads just above the level of the desert, Queen Dixie and Lofty Dick glared, rather than gazed out over the level stretch of bare sands, in the direction of her extended arm. And as he made the same discovery which had so unnerved her, Lofty Dick turned ghastly pale, trembling in every limb like a wind-shivered leaf, a gasping curse of mingled rage and dismay escaping his lips.

More than a mile away two horsemen rode along, side by side, their faces turned toward the desert sink. The refracted rays of the glowing afternoon sun caused the sands of the desert to dance and quiver, both magnifying and distorting objects when viewed from a distance, and under ordinary circumstances, personal recognition at that long range would have ranked among the impossibilities, but this was no ordinary emergency, nor were those riders ordinary men.

"Holy smoke! King Saul! Back again!"

Each couplet of words escaped from the blanched lips of Lofty Dick in faint, explosive gasps, and despite her own agitation, Queen Dixie turned sharply upon him, her eyes glittering, her red lids parting in a murmur of wonder. She saw him trembling, saw the white line around his mouth and the pinched look about his nostrils, and something almost of angry contempt flashed athwart her beautiful face, as she hissed:

"Coward! Is this the way to face peril? Brace up and be a man! Show the white feather now, and I'll hate you—loathe myself for having thrown over a man like him for a craven puppet of your caliber!"

One moment thus, looking gloriously beautiful in her hot rage and impetuous scorn; then a complete change, her voice low and hurried, full of imploring tenderness, almost coaxing:

"For my sake, Dick! Think—what if he suspects the mad and terrible truth from your agitation? He *can* know nothing as yet, and we must act to throw dust in his eyes if he has any doubts. Godown—keep out of sight, unless you can regain your old nerve, for I know well that this is *not* cowardice. I *could not* love a craven! And I have proved how very dear you are to my heart. I have sinned—but go! Talk to the men. Hurry them up to take the saddle in behalf of King Saul. You only received the tidings this hour. I will remount and hasten to play my part. I only came to warn the men—"

While hurriedly whispering, Queen Dixie was

rapidly descending the winding trail, pushing her unnerved confederate before her, abruptly breaking off her incoherent speech as they came closer to the spot where the Rustlers were covering the mangled corpse of Buffalo Red from sight.

A sharp whistle brought the grazing horse to her side, with a glad whinny, and leaping lightly into the saddle, she only paused to cry to the startled Rustlers:

"Make haste and shorten your preparations as much as possible, then follow the lead of your newly-elected chief. I have told him what are my plans for the rescue of King Saul. He will pass the word to you—and by the memory of your king and mine! I beseech you to forget all personal fears, all likes and dislikes, all save the extremity of our gallant chief, who so sorely needs your hardest, boldest blows! If we cannot save, we can and will avenge him!"

While speaking, Queen Dixie was viciously spurring her snorting steed up the winding trail, the last words leaving her lips and floating back to the men below, who broke into a loud and enthusiastic shout, stirred to the core by that passionate appeal, the perfect sincerity of which not one among them all, save and except Lofty Dick, even thought of doubting.

But Queen Dixie made no sign, if she heard the cry. She had reached the level, but there wrenched in her horse, looking like one suddenly stricken dumb by great surprise, as she leaned a little forward in the saddle, staring ahead as though at some wondrous vision.

Only for a brief space. Then a wild scream escaped her lips. She turned partly around in the saddle, and waving one gauntleted hand to the startled Rustlers in the sink, cried:

"He's here—alive—safe—our king!"

Her spurs were driven deep into the heaving flanks of her horse, and she dashed forward at full speed toward the two horsemen, shouting shrilly, the very personification of an almost insane delight.

And King Saul—for Queen Dixie was right, and it was indeed the King of the Rustlers, riding with Windy Jess, no longer Fred Bloodgood, the "tenderfoot"—how did he meet her?

With open arms, and expressions of tender joy that fully equaled her own. While in prison, he had entertained many damning suspicions of treachery on the part of those whom he had until then trusted wholly and implicitly, prominent among whom was the beautiful woman in manly garb whom he now clasped to his broad bosom with a fervor that seemed to have driven all the blood from her face, on whose lips he pressed kisses so hot and burning that they apparently sucked the red hue from the soft, moist flesh, leaving them pale and livid.

But only for a brief space. It was not his embrace, not his scorching caresses that altered Queen Dixie, but the sudden reacting from almost despair to reviving hope.

True, in her maneuvering, she had not forgotten caution; in all her movements and plotting, she had kept in cunning disguise, while striking none the less deadly blows at the heart of the man whom she had once loved as women seldom love in these days, but whom she now hated only less than she feared—the man whom she called husband, though the laws of neither man nor gospel had blessed or sanctioned the union.

But she knew, too, how suspicious he was by nature; how keen of wit and clear of comprehension, and she at first dreaded lest he had gained some inkling of the damning truth. If he had, she felt that his greeting would be like that of a maddened tiger; quite as sudden, full as deadly. Instead, he met her with burning kisses, with endearing epithets instead of curses, exhibiting his hot love without thinking of Windy Jess being a smiling, sneering witness.

Expecting death, she had rushed toward him, with a courage born of utter desperation. Receiving love and life, she turned faint and trembling in body; but that only increased the naturalness of her acting.

With eyes half-closed, supported in the saddle by the powerful arm of the man whom she had so shamefully betrayed to what she believed must prove certain death—against whom she was plotting, even then, her busy brain occupied with anxious thoughts of Lofty Dick—Queen Dixie watched the eager rush of the Rustlers up from the desert sink, listened to their wild yells of extravagant glee as they crowded about the chief for whom they felt such a peculiar compound of love and fear, and bit her lip until it bled as she failed to see the form of Lofty Dick among them.

Another than she noted this, and there was an ugly ring to the voice of King Saul as he demanded:

"I do not see either Lofty Dick or Buffalo Red among you; where are they? There has been no fighting? You have not been off on any foray? In the fiend's name!" he cried, in sudden heat, as the Rustlers shrunk away, interchanging covert glances, each waiting for some other to make reply; "what is the matter? Have you all lost your tongues?"

With a violent effort of will, Queen Dixie

rallied her shaken energies, and softly whispered in his ear:

"Let me explain, Saul, my king; but not now. It's a long story, to tell properly, so that you can see it all in just light—a sad tale, but one that casts no bitter blame on any of those who took part in it."

By this time, they had reached the edge of the sink, and King Saul led the way down the curved trail, drawing rein as he gained the bottom, staring at the newly-formed grave.

"Who's in that?" he muttered, his eyes filled with a red light that renewed the almost lulled suspicions of his queen. "Some one has been killed. Tell me his name. Not Lofty Dick?"

"Buffalo Red," replied Queen Dixie, vainly striving to banish all unsteadiness from her tones.

"And Lofty Dick killed him?" demanded King Saul, in quieter tones. "They quarreled, what about? Ha! they fought to see which one should wear my shoes!"

"Not that," hurriedly replied Queen Dixie, betraying too much anxiety for her own good, perhaps, in her endeavor to calm the excitable chief of the Rustlers. "But the men demanded a man to lead them to your rescue—we were just starting out when I discovered you coming—and their choice was balanced evenly between the two; Lofty Dick and Buffalo Red. No man would alter his vote, and there was only the one thing to do, for your sake, Saul, since delay would be fatal, if the news brought us was true. They fought, and Buffalo Red was killed. It could not be avoided. With the men divided into two different cliques, nothing could be accomplished—"

"Did Lofty Dick hide beyond your skirts? Did he enlist you as a special pleader? Is he in hiding, until you can make his peace with me, for killing the best and truest man in all the band?" cried King Saul, his eyes glowing redly. "I thought there was more of grit and pluck in the boy—"

"If you think I am a coward, King Saul, I'm not fit to remain in the family," said a cold, composed voice, and Lofty Dick stepped forward, his hands empty, his blue eyes filled with a steady light as he confronted the chief. "You have your pistols; use them, if you think me a coward. I give you a fair mark to shoot at!" and he threw open his richly embroidered jacket, tapping with one finger directly over his heart.

A dazzling light shot into the lustrous orbs of Queen Dixie; a proud smile curled her red lip; her hand fell upon a pistol-butt, but she uttered not a word, made not a move to interpose between the two men who confronted each other.

Never, perhaps, in all his checkered, eventful career, had Spitfire Saul stood closer to the threshold of death than he did at that moment, for had he raised a hand against the life of the dandy Rustler, she whom he had worn upon his bosom for years, would have sent her lead through his brain, even though she knew that the Rustlers would as surely slay her in turn.

But the end was not fated to come after that fashion. King Saul seemed pleased by the bold front of the man whom he had so sternly arraigned, and the black frown changed to a smile, as he promptly uttered:

"There speaks the Lofty Dick I have known so long! I ask your pardon, lad, for the doubts I expressed; but you can hardly blame me, when you reflect. Here I am, just back from the grave, as one might say, and of all the family, you hung back and had no word of welcome."

"Because of that," and Lofty Dick nodded toward the new-made grave. "I remembered how you trusted the poor fellow, and I feared you would give me more blame than I really deserve. I killed him, but it was because there was no other way out of an unfortunate tangle, which might imperil your last chance of safety. In doing so, I pitted my life against his; he lost, I won; but if it is at the cost of your displeasure, I could heartily wish that fortune smiled on him, instead."

King Saul leaned forward in his saddle and clasped the hand of the dandy Rustler, with a fervor that almost crushed the bones, but said no more. Touching up his horse, with Queen Dixie, all smiles and tenderness, riding at his side, he made his way to the adobe building and alighted.

They entered the building together, the Rustlers remaining outside, eagerly discussing between themselves the return of their idolized chief, wondering how his escape from what had appeared certain death had been accomplished.

"I reckon he'll tell us all we've any right to know, when he gits a good ready," whined Brocky Bill, still whittling. "I want to know the hull thing, 'bout as bad as any o' ye, but I ain't eetchin' so bad that I'd ax him to tell—not much!"

Of them all, Lofty Dick kept to himself, his handsome countenance clouded and moody. Bitter black thoughts racked his brain. To remove this man from his path, he had plotted long and wickedly. He had a double prize in view—the lovely wife of his chief, and the great store of gold and notes which he knew the

King of the Rustlers had accumulated since entering upon his career of blood and rapine.

Success, complete, without alloy, had seemed to reward his schemes; but now—all looked dark and stormy. King Saul had returned to claim his own again. He was shrewd and keen-witted as he was unscrupulous and revengeful. What if he suspected the truth? What if he had learned something while a captive, of the evil doings of his wife? If he had—if he entertained the slightest doubt of her fidelity, there was only one whom he could select as her confederate—himself.

An hour passed. The sun was setting, and twilight was already settling down into the desert sink, when Queen Dixie emerged from the adobe building, and approached the fires around which the Rustlers were gathered, cooking their supper.

Her white finger touched her lips as a shout of greeting welcomed her coming, and then she spoke hurriedly:

"King Saul is sleeping just now. Keep quiet, and do not disturb him. He has known little rest since he fell into the hands of those brutal hounds, and needs all he can get now."

She moved toward the little pond, casting a swift, covert glance around her, as though in search of some one whom she as yet failed to discover, and rightly guessing that he it was whom she sought, Lofty Dick joined her when the shrubbery by the lower end of the pond would screen him from the view of the Rustlers around the camp-fires.

"Hist!" he whispered, before rising from his covert: "Do not be alarmed; it is only me. I fancied you wanted to see me."

"So I did, but we must not waste time," hurriedly returned Queen Dixie, with a flurried glance toward the house. "I left him asleep, but he may awaken at any moment, and if he misses me, his suspicions might be awakened again."

"If you would only drive your dagger deep into his heart as he sleeps!" hissed Lofty Dick, his eyes glowing like those of an angry cat in the dark, as his arm stole around the lithe waist of the faithless woman.

"And have the men tear me limb from limb as payment? No, thank you, little one," with a soft laugh that was almost a sigh, as she leaned her cheek against his.

"It will be no worse than what awaits us, if the ugly devil suspects the parts we have been playing, and I more than half-believe he knows all!" he said, gloomily.

"No—I don't think that. If he had learned the whole truth, he would have crushed me to death instead of caressing me, when I met him out yonder. He would have killed you, not clasped your hand. Whatever else he may be, King Saul is no hypocrite, no coward to smile in a man's face, and then strike him in the back."

"Bah! your old love is returning!" sneered Lofty Dick.

"You know better than that, Dick," she said, simply. "It is true, though, that King Saul is a braver, better man than you are or ever will be. But that don't change my heart. I hate him. I love you. That should satisfy you, dear."

"Nothing will ever satisfy me while he lives," with a bitter curse that might well have blistered his lips. "Until then, neither you nor I can draw a free breath. We don't know at what moment his cursed hands may tighten upon our throats to choke out our lives as though we were vermin. *He must die! You must realize that as well as I!*"

"True; but our time is not yet. We must throw dust in his eyes for the present, and wait for another opening. I came out here to warn you to be upon your guard, never for a moment relax your vigilance. Throw off your black looks, and counterfeit the joy which all the other men feel. In short, act out your old self, as you were when we had no such dangerous secrets to conceal. You can, if you will."

"And you? You will play the loving wife, I suppose?"

"Better that than death—which would be our portion were I to falter now. Good-by!" and she kissed him on the lips, then glided away and re-entered the house.

Half an hour later, King Saul emerged, and when the glad shout died away, he uttered words that were very welcome:

"Ho, for a frolic, my lads, in honor of your chief's return!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE PIPE DANCE.

LOUDER, wilder rung out the cheers of the Rustlers, and King Saul watched their extravagant antics with an indulgent smile playing around his lips, curling his forked beard and drooping mustaches. Anything but a heartless demon looked he then, and no one, seeing him for the first time as he stood there in the ruddy glow of the camp-fires, would have imagined that he was the man whose explosive temper and ungovernable passions had bestowed upon him the title of Spitfire Saul.

"Good lads, one and all!" he cried, with an approving nod of his kingly head, as the out-

laws paused from lack of breath. "There's a hearty, whole-souled ring to your voices that pleases me, for it declares that my safe return gives you unalloyed pleasure. I, too, am rejoiced, perhaps with still better cause for thankfulness; and yet—it was with my heart full of bitter, black suspicions that I came here to-day. Right or wrong, I more than half believed that some one among this band had sold me out, and delivered me into the hands of the Philistines!"

A groan that was almost a howl, arose from the bandits, and the devil gleamed forth from more than one pair of eyes, as Brocky Bill, still whistling, still with that indescribable whine which invariably marked his utterance, gave voice to the sentiments which animated all save one of the league:

"I reckon we don't want to know no more then the name o' the dirty critter which you 'spects, boss. Jest give us the name, an' see how easy we boys kin take a dose o' business afore gittin' drunk on frolic. Jest the name, boss!"

Silently, secretly, the hand of Lofty Dick crept toward the butt of a revolver as he stood not far from the elbow of his chief, though only a red glitter in his blue eyes told aught of the deadly resolve with which his heart and brain was filled. Though he knew that his own death would follow at the hands of the infuriated Rustlers before he could strike a second blow, he was determined not to cross the dark river wholly without company.

But Spitfire Saul never once glanced toward him, never made a sign of suspecting the actual truth.

"What would be the just reward of the coward who would act thus?" he cried, half laughingly, turning toward Queen Dixie, who just then emerged from the adobe building.

"Death, if you appoint me as judge, King Saul!" she cried, without the faintest sign of shrinking from his fiery gaze. "With these honest rascals, I say—give us his name, and you shall never suspect him again!"

"You would not kill the poor devil, simply on suspicion?"

"His giving cause for *your* suspecting him is grounds enough," was the swift response. "Once more, King Saul: give us the name of the false-hearted wretch, and leave the rest to us. As Brocky Bill says, business before pleasure!"

"You are too fierce, my dear," laughed King Saul, throwing his arm about her waist and pressing his lips to her glowing cheek, regardless of all the eyes upon them. "Suspicion is not proof, and I am in too good a humor with myself and all the rest of mankind to-night to care about running the risk of spilling innocent blood."

"Which I don't reckon them critters is, back in town, then," whined Brocky Bill, looking like a man aghast at his own audacity, and holding himself in readiness to dodge either bullet or blow, in case his words were offensive.

But Spitfire Saul only laughed, loud and heartily, as he recalled the more prominent events of his latest triumph.

"That's a fact, old sinner! I did open their eyes a little yesterday, and if you back me up as well as you always have done heretofore, we'll not let them go to sleep again very soon. The story's too long to tell now, but you shall have it in full in good time. A frolic now, for there's big work ahead of us—plenty of excitement and lots of hard cash to save the rough knocks we may get in change!"

"Your arm, Queen Dixie. To the hall, gentlemen. We'll have a dance of joy for the present, and vengeance for the future."

"Whooray fer King Saul an' Queen Dixie!" squealed Brocky Bill, capering around like some stiff-legged puppet as he tossed his ragged hat high into the air. "Ef they ain't a pa'r o' bloomin' daisies, then I'm a durned ole ground-hog!"

Into the building Spitfire Saul led his beautiful queen, clasping her waist tightly with one arm as he called out:

"Light up, boys. Don't spare either oil or candles. I'm on it to-night bigger'n a wolf, and if we don't make music in Israel before daylight comes, my name's not King Saul!"

A minute later the interior of the apartment was brilliantly lighted by a score of candles and as many oil lamps, fastened to the walls or hanging from the ceiling.

The room was one of considerable size, nearly square in shape, with high ceiling. At the end opposite that in which was the doorway through which the present company had entered, was a partition of canvas, tightly stretched, a light frame marking the middle, and giving support to a narrow door.

King Saul and Queen Dixie passed through this door, and a few minutes later there came a sharp, long-drawn note from a violin, and several of the Rustlers leaped to the partition and swung it in halves back against the side walls.

A curious sight was thus revealed, but one that did not appear to take the Rustlers by surprise, though they greeted it with enthusiastic cheers.

Against the center of the rear wall, was a sort of dais, elevated several feet above the

level of the earth floor, covered over with skins and robes, and upon which were placed two chairs, formed of curiously entwined elk-horns. Above the seats, hung a bright canopy. Just in front, a candle-filled chandelier hung from the ceiling, while lights were fastened to either side on the walls.

King Saul and Queen Dixie occupied those chairs, dressed in mock representation of royalty, in silks and broadcloth, gold and silver lace, rings and ornaments which flashed gayly in the lights. On each head rested a crown of metal, the mock jewels with which they were thickly set, reflecting many colored rays as their wearers moved their heads.

Every inch a king looked Spitfire Saul, with his commanding form, his leonine head and massive shoulders, his magnificent forked beard. And not a whit less regal was Queen Dixie, her dark and glorious beauty emphasized by the robes she wore, looking larger, more superbly developed than when in her masculine garb.

"Gentlemen subjects!" said King Saul, softly touching the strings of his violin as he spoke. "This night we will cast aside all care, and forget that there is such a word as work or business in our vocabulary. We will dance and make merry. Don your finery, ye who can transform yourselves into charming ladies at will. Brocky Bill, set out the pipes. We will see if you have lost any of your skill since I've been out on the loose."

As he ceased speaking, King Saul raised the butt of the violin to his shoulder, and swept the bow across the strings. Then he began playing, handling the instrument with rare skill and execution, awaking such music as responds only to the touch of a master musician.

With shouts and cries of merriment, the Rustlers obeyed their chief. One-half their number rushed outside and soon returned, bearing bundles which, on being torn open, displayed a most wonderful collection of female clothing, highly colored and ornamented with gaudy ribbons and artificial flowers, torn and tattered, looking like the remnants of a millinery store after a cyclone had worked its sweet will.

In these fantastic garments they quickly arrayed themselves, caring little whether they were put on hind side before, or after the correct fashion; if anything, rather giving the former the preference.

Brocky Bill brought forth a shallow basket full of long-stemmed, white clay pipes, selecting one from the number and snapping off two-thirds of the stem.

Each man quickly imitated his example, seeming to vie with each other as to who should sport the shortest stem, King Saul all the time playing his liveliest airs, as though to work his subjects up to the top notch of excitement.

Her face sober, an uneasy light in her eyes, Queen Dixie watched the scene, but gazing most frequently at Lofty Dick, who leaned moodily against the wall, his lips curling in scorn as he listlessly noted the mad antics of his comrades. She bit her lips sharply, as she strove to catch his eye for a warning glance, but in vain. He scrupulously avoided looking in that direction, or if he did, never raised his eyes high enough to read her meaning.

He was pondering over those words which King Saul had spoken outside, concerning a traitor among them. He felt that he was the man suspected, and he believed that there was something dangerous hidden beneath this mask of merriment; that Spitfire Saul was only seeking to throw him off his guard, to lull his suspicions of danger, but to spring the trap, and make his vengeance all the more acutely felt.

"If I don't strike first, he'll kill me, and that without giving a ghost of a chance for striking a blow in return," he mentally exclaimed; then strode forward and picking up a pipe, held it in plain view as he snapped the stem, leaving a scant inch attached to the bowl.

Spitfire Saul nodded, with a smile of grim approval.

"I expected no less from one of your nerve, Lofty Dick," he said, still playing, but so low that the chords seemed the distant wailing of the wind through tree-tops. "But I'm sorry to see you have not yet forgotten nor forgiven the hasty words I let drop, out yonder, when I looked upon the grave of grim old Buffalo Red; when I learned that he had died at your hands, and you failed to come and meet me with the rest."

"They were sharp, and cut deep—all the deeper because I knew that they were wholly undeserved by me," said Lofty Dick, boldly, facing the King of the Rustlers, his blue eyes filled with a fire that was little short of defiance.

"I admitted as much, as soon as I heard the truth of the affair," said Spitfire Saul, speaking with unwonted gentleness. "When a man has apologized for a wrong committed in heat, can any one expect or receive more?"

The eyes of Lofty Dick sunk before that steady, penetrating gaze, and a little flush came into his pale cheeks.

"Of course not," he uttered, slowly, speaking with seeming difficulty. "And yet, when a man finds himself so sharply blamed, while all

the time conscious that he has only done what he felt his duty, it is not so easy to cover up all trace of the scar. By to-morrow, I pledge you my word, as your faithful follower, you shall see no trace left to offend you!"

Was there a hidden threat in the words, in that swift-appearing, swiftly-vanishing smile that curled the red lips?

If so, King Saul did not appear to notice it, though Queen Dixie did, and with an imploring, yet warning light in her eyes she leaned forward, seeking to catch his glance—only to fall back again in her seat as Spitfire Saul turned his face toward her, bending his head and whispering a word in her ear. She forced a smile to her lips, nodded her head, and he turned once more to the gathering.

"You, Lofty Dick, will have the lovely and graceful Miss Snapper Johnny for your partner in the pipe dance. The others can select their own partners. Do honor to your queen, your king, and to yourselves, my gallant knights."

With ludicrously exaggerated politeness and most comical assumption of dignity, the Rustlers in male costume sought their partners from those attired in burlesque imitation of the fair sex, then glanced expectantly toward the dais.

One flourish of his bow, then King Saul struck up a lively air, his clear, sonorous voice calling out the changes as the dancing proceeded, waxing fast and furious. No longer hampered by the mock dignity which they had at first assumed, the Rustlers caused their boot-heels to ring upon the hard-beaten floor, leaping and prancing, kicking and stamping, crowing like cocks, squealing like angered horses, imitating with more or less skill, almost every sound that could be uttered by beast or bird, yet promptly obedient to the changes as called forth by their chief.

Then came a brace of sharp discords on the violin, and as if by magic, each right hand clasped a revolver butt, while the sharp double clicks as the hammers were raised to full cock, sounded even above the rattle and clatter of two-score feet on the brick-like floor. Yet not for an instant did the dancing flag, only now there was no more of the wild, fantastic flinging about on the loose. Each man had his eyes riveted on the face of his especial partner, holding his revolver with the tip of the barrel touching his right shoulder.

"Salute your partners!" rung out the voice of King Saul, like the call of a trumpet, and blending with the last syllable, came a horrible discord on the violin.

Swift as thought the revolvers came down to a level, the men who held them bowing low at the call, then rising erect, still dancing, and when that false note came to their ears, each and every pistol in the crowd exploded, almost as a single report. Then, as though suddenly turned to stone, the dancers ceased their capers, standing stiff and erect.

The floor was covered with fragments of white clay—no longer pipes. With marvelous skill, and nerve to equal it, the Rustlers had shattered the bowls with their bullets.

The bits of stems were still retained between the close-clinched teeth, and as each couple, beginning with the pair who stood at the head, turned to face their king, they opened their lips and dropped the tiny tubes. Not one had failed to hit his designated mark, while all were dancing swiftly; a score of bullets were imbedded in the adobe walls, while—greatest marvel of all, it seemed—not a wound had been received by any of the company.

King Saul nodded approvingly as the curious inspection came to an end, and there was cordial congratulation in his tones as he addressed them:

"Nobly done, my bold and skillful knights! If our enemies would take pattern after our peculiar sports, perhaps they wouldn't waste so much lead when we meet them in battle array. I wish they were here now, to take notes!"

"Softly, King Saul!" whined Brocky Bill, seemingly ready to dodge behind his partner, in case the chief should resent his proffered advice. "Don't breathe it out loud, for the good Lawd knows they shoot plenty cluss fer this ole coon as it is—they do so, I tell 'ee now!"

"Never fear, Brocky," laughed the chief. "I never knew an honest man who would risk his life at such sport as this. He holds it at too high a price, to indulge in such recklessness, and so knows nothing of the wild fun we Rustlers revel in to our hearts' content. And I say, good enough! Let them live the longer, while we live the jolliest!"

"Now to work again. One more mad dance, then to sleep and rest for the greatest, richest strike I have ever planned. To your pipes, my lads! Do yourselves honor, now or never!"

As before, there was emulation in seeing which one would dare break the stem of his pipe the closest, and more than one among the mirth-maddened rascals left scarce enough to grasp between their teeth while the small bowl was pressed tightly against their lips. Snapper Johnny was one of these, and as before he faced Lofty Dick, when the stirring sounds of the rarely handled fiddle called them to their mad, insane dance.

Faster and more furious played King Saul. Wilder grew the yells, cries, screams and laughter, as the Rustlers cut up all manner of ludicrous antics.

Once more came the warning discords which brought out the loaded revolvers. Still on capered the Rustlers, listening for the warning to cock their weapons and to secure their aim; clear and distinct it came—then the volley of fire and lead—high above which rung out a yell of angry pain!

On the instant one of the dancers whirled half around and fired a second shot, so rapidly following his first that it seemed a hang-fire, and King Saul fell over sideways.

"Holy mother!" screamed Queen Dixie. "King Saul is slain!"

CHAPTER XVI.

KING SAUL PUTS ON THE CURB.

THE mad revelers seemed fairly petrified as, hearing that wild cry escape the lips of Queen Dixie, they stared toward the throne, only to behold their king and chief falling over sideways, then lay motionless upon the mass of skins and furs.

Brocky Bill was the first to break the spell, and even in that moment of intensest excitement and maddest fury, his drawling whine was more marked than ever, if that could be.

"Who did it, now? Who pulled that trigger? Sech a hell-fired, keardless critter ain't fit to live, nobow, eh, mates?"

"He did it! Lofty Dick! I see'd 'im!" spluttered Snapper Johnny, spitting out blood and teeth with each explosive sentence, ending with a howl of mingled pain and fury as he clapped one hand to his bullet-marked lips, and snatched a revolver from his belt with the other.

"You lie!" cried Lofty Dick, at the same instant leaping forward, and with a single stroke, deftly landed between the eyes of the howling Rustler, lifting him from his feet, and hurling him nearly across the room before his carcass touched the floor. "The man that dares accuse me of such foul cowardice, has got to eat his words or my lead—mind that!"

An accusation promptly resented, but things looked black for the dandy Rustler, and his white face grew still whiter, his blue eyes glittered with a desperate light, as he saw the black scowls and heard the ugly mutterings which were rapidly growing audible. They remembered that Snapper Johnny had been the *vis-à-vis* of Lofty Dick. It was natural enough that none others had seen the shot fired, since they had eyes and thoughts only for their own partners in that mad dance. But if Lofty Dick had done the deed, then Snapper Johnny must surely have witnessed it, precisely as he charged.

From her seat on the throne from which King Saul had been so suddenly removed, Queen Dixie witnessed the scene. She saw the growing storm, heard the mutterings which were directed toward Lofty Dick, and right well she knew that, were the storm suffered to break, her lover would never live through it.

Lofty Dick was equally keen-sighted, and scarcely had he delivered the swift blow that sent Snapper Johnny headlong to the earthen floor, than a cocked revolver filled each hand. A single, backward leap, carried him close to the foot of the throne, bringing all the Rustlers before him, and over the leveled tubes, the dandy outlaw cried, sternly, defiantly:

"Fingers straight, and no snap-judgments this time! That dirty dog lied, and I'm ready to meet his charges, when made in proper shape; but you can't crawl all over me first, then try the remains—not much!"

Lithe and active in all her movements as a panther, Queen Dixie rose from her throne and with a single bound, alighted beside Lofty Dick, her little brown hands clasping the pearl butts of a brace of revolvers, the chambers of which threatened the irresolute Rustlers as her voice rung out sharply:

"Hold hard all! I'll riddle the man that dares to pull trigger! Lofty Dick is innocent. I saw the shot fired—and the cowardly assassin was none other than Snapper Johnny!"

A wild, tumultuous yell from the Rustlers seemed to presage a desperate onslaught, but then both Queen Dixie and Lofty Dick saw that their eyes were not riveted upon them—that they were staring beyond; and mechanically they turned, to behold a kingly form just filling the throne, and to hear the voice of the man whom they both had believed slain, ring out:

"The dance is over, and if there's any more shooting to be done here, I'll do it! Put up your weapons. And you, my fair queen, resume your seat beside me."

Alive, seemingly unharmed, King Saul sat upon the throne from which he had so suddenly tumbled at the crack of that treacherously-aimed pistol. In each hand he held a revolver, covering both Queen Dixie and the dandy Rustler. A touch of his finger would be the signal for their death. They were wholly at his mercy, and realizing this, as their sole hope, they obeyed his commands and replaced their weapons.

"Keep your places, all!" cried King Saul, the sneering smile vanishing and giving place to a

stern frown the moment he saw the couple had relinquished their weapons. "There has been foul work here, and I mean to probe the matter to the very bottom. One cowardly cur tried to kill me, and though I was quick enough to dodge his lead, yet the crime is none the less deserving punishment. I heard Snapper Johnny charge the deed upon Lofty Dick, and Queen Dixie make a counter charge. Seize and disarm all three, but do them no injury."

For a moment the Rustlers stood irresolute, looking at the paling countenance of their Queen, but then the whining voice of Brocky Bill broke the spell.

"The boss says so, an' we got to do it, boys, we has sure!"

His bony hand fell upon the shoulder of Lofty Dick, but had not time to fairly close, ere a hard fist shot out and sent him reeling back against his comrades, while the dandy Rustler grated through his tight-clinched teeth:

"Keep your distance, boys, or somebody'll get hurt, *bad!* I'll surrender to the king, but never to *you!*"

At the same instant, with a cry of angry despair, Queen Dixie struck aside the hands that sought to grasp her, and drawing a revolver, darted closer to the side of Lofty Dick.

"Back, you curs!" she cried, her jetty orbs flashing fire. "I'll kill the one that dares to pollute me with his touch!"

The words had scarcely escaped her lips when one of the Rustlers grasped her from behind, knocking her pistol-hand up so that the bullet spent itself on the ceiling.

A terrified cry from the woman; then Lofty Dick, forgetting his own peril, leaped to her rescue, striking out swiftly with one hand, while he strove to draw a pistol with the other.

King Saul as swiftly changed his aim, and then fired. At the sharp explosion Lofty Dick uttered a stifled yell, then fell heavily upon his face.

Startled, the Rustlers drew back, leaving Queen Dixie free, and a moan of bitter agony escaped her lips as she saw the form of Lofty Dick fall at her very feet.

She forgot all caution, then. She only remembered that she loved this young man as she had never loved before, and falling upon her knees beside him, she lifted the bloody head in her arms, pressing it to her wildly-throbbing heart.

"Dead, my darling!" she gasped, each word wrung from her bleeding heart by a pang that defies description. "Dick—look up! Speak to me—just one word! Say that you are not dead!"

His eyes like coals of living fire, but with a grim smile curling his mustaches, King Saul gazed upon the woman for a brief space in silence, while the awed Rustlers shrunk still further away, for even they could not mistake the dangerous secret thus plainly revealed, and they expected nothing else than that Spitfire Saul would burst out into a furious rage which would sweep everything before it, innocent as well as guilty.

But in this respect they mistook him. His voice was icy cold as he spoke, each word falling distinct and metallic:

"Your majesty strangely forgets yourself. Instead of a foolish, hot-headed boy, one would think you were mourning over a brother—or a lover! Calm yourself, good queen!"

His mocking speech had an instantaneous effect. Queen Dixie gently lowered the blood-stained head to the floor, and arose, looking neither to the right nor the left until she had resumed her seat beside King Saul. Then she spoke:

"You are right. I forgot myself. But it all came so suddenly; your fall, dead as I believed; the lying charge of the real assassin; the wrong you put upon me when you bade the band disarm me; his being shot down—"

"Particularly the last catastrophe!" sneered King Saul.

"I do not deny it," she replied, speaking lowly, but with intense feeling. "You had turned against me. Of the others, he alone had shown himself a sincere, sympathetic, yet thoroughly respectful friend. Can you wonder, then—"

"I have passed the point of feeling surprise at anything, my dear," smiled King Saul, showing his teeth. "All I care to remember at present, is this: I have been shot at by one of the family, who are oath-bound to protect and guard me upon all occasions. Only a pure accident saved me from instant death, as you can see for yourself," turning and pointing to where a bullet-hole showed in the wall directly behind where he sat. "As I lay half stunned on the floor, I heard Lofty Dick charged with the deed, and I felt that it was my duty, as chief of the family, to investigate the matter to the very bottom. Not alone for his punishment, but for his honor, if he is innocent, as you declared."

"Yet you killed him!"

"Then the fault lies with the pistol I used, not in my aim or my intention," retorted King Saul, with a short laugh. "As the shortest way to bring the hot-head to reason, I creased him with a bullet. And now—a word in your ear.

Give up your weapons, as I shall do, without any words or hesitation. We are playing with tigers, and must humor them."

Raising his head again, King Saul beckoned to Brocky Bill, who shambled forward, and received the pistols which his master held out. Mechanically Queen Dixie followed his example, though in her heart she felt that in doing so she was abandoning her last hope of either escape or revenge.

"We are judges, not executioners," said King Saul, in explanation to the Rustlers, who still stood irresolute, not knowing what step to take first. "Look to Snapper Johnny and Lofty Dick, some of you. Restore them to consciousness as speedily as possible. Remove their weapons, and handcuff both. Work lively, now!"

In silence he was obeyed. It was soon seen that Lofty Dick had not been seriously injured by the bullet that laid him low, the missile having simply glanced along the side of his skull, depriving him of his senses for the time being.

Snapper Johnny was in hardly better case, that terrible blow having completely knocked him out of time, but the liberal application of cold water outwardly and hot whisky inwardly, soon brought both men around again, and then, disarmed, their hands united by stout bracelets, they were led forward and guarded close before the throne.

King Saul gazed at the two prisoners for a few moments before speaking. Lofty Dick, pale as death, save where two tiny rills of blood had trickled down his face, held his head proudly erect, stern defiance glowing in his blue eyes, without the slightest trace of fear in his demeanor. He believed that certain death would be his portion, but now that he was brought face to face with it, the old awe which he had learned to feel for King Saul, died away, to live no more.

On the contrary, Snapper Johnny was thoroughly cowed, and stood with downcast head, trembling convulsively in his boots and looked as though he would have sunk nervelessly to the floor, but for the strong arms which held him up.

Always ugly and forbidding in face, he was still less a beauty, now. Directly between his eyes was a rapidly swelling lump, already turning purple and bearing the imprint of four sharp knuckles, where the iron fist of Lofty Dick had alighted. In addition to this, his lips were cut and dripping blood, where a bullet had torn its way, knocking out teeth both above and below.

"So, Snapper Johnny," said King Saul, in an encouraging tone of voice. "It was *your* cry that I heard! What caused it?"

"That dirty cuss shot me, 'stead o' the pipe!" mumbled the Rustler, casting a malignant glance toward his fellow prisoner. "Split my lips an' knocked out my teeth—see!"

As he uttered the word, Snapper Johnny opened wide his mouth, to show that he had only spoken the truth. All of his front teeth had been torn out by the missile.

"You are sure of this?" asked King Saul. "You are positive that Lofty Dick fired the shot that mutilated you after this disagreeable fashion?"

"Sartin sure!" was the confident reply. "Wasn't he my pardner! Would anybody else shoot at my pipe? An' then I see him with my own eyes, which ain't the wo'st, nuther—"

"One thing at a time, my good fellow," interposed King Saul, lifting his hand with an imperious gesture. "Answer the questions as I put them, and leave the rest to me. You positively charge Lofty Dick with wounding you; do you believe it was the result of an accident, or that it was done intentionally, through pure malice?"

"You all know how he kin shoot, ef he likes," mumbled the wounded Rustler. "Is it like that he'd miss a mark like a pipe, so cluss as we was together? He did it to git square fer my perposin' the name o' Buffler Red ag'inst him, when we all thought you was lynched!"

"You hear the charge, Lofty Dick; what have you to say?"

"That I am very sorry for the accident, so far as that goes, but that it was the fault of the clumsy brute altogether, none of mine. Just as I shot, he lurched forward, and caught the lead in his teeth," quickly, but calmly replied the accused, boldly encountering that burning gaze.

"You are willing to make oath to this?"

"On the Bible—if you can produce one," with a low laugh at the ridiculous idea.

"You feel no ill-will toward Snapper Johnny?"

"Why should I? He is a good enough man, when it comes to a tight pinch, where there is no outrunning lead, but beyond that he is hardly a man whom I would be envious of."

King Saul kept silence for a few moments, then turned to the remainder of the Rustlers, speaking sharply:

"Did any of you fellows see anything out of the way? Can you throw any light upon this ugly affair?"

There was a breathless silence for a brief space, among the Rustlers, then Brocky Bill

replied, for his companions, as well as for himself.

"Not a glimmer, boss. We was 'tendin' to business, an' in a pipe dance, you know thar ain't no time to look out fer what any other critter's doin', 'cept you an' your own mate."

"Very well," said King Saul, coldly, as he turned once more to the prisoners. "Under the circumstances, there is only one course to pursue, one decision to make."

"Snapper Johnny swears that the shot was fired with malicious intent; but the smart of his wound may warp his judgment, though I feel confident he would not make such a dangerous charge, without firmly believing in its truth."

"Lofty Dick swears it was an accident; and that is an unfortunate plea for him. An accident, among men like us, is a weakness, and that is worse than a deliberate crime."

"You all know the strict rules which govern our pipe and boot-heel dances. If one man wounds another, he is expected to pay the penalty. All are bound by those rules, since no man is obliged to participate, against his free will."

"Now one word to you, Lofty Dick, before passing sentence upon you. You deserve punishment, even if we take the most charitable view of the matter: that your nerve failed you at the very moment when it should have stood firmest. When a man in our line of life begins to lose his nerve, he is dangerous to the entire family, and must be taught a lesson. What have you to say before I pass sentence?"

"Just this," was the bold response. "You are only too glad of an excuse to put me out of the way. You hate me, because the boys chose me chief to fill the shoes you had, as they believed, no further use for. You fear that they will soon learn to regret that you ever escaped the rope, to come back and tyrannize over them, and you believe that your reign will last longer, if I am put out of the way for good and all."

"So be it! I am ready to pay the penalty, now that I have shown the real cause of my being condemned. Go on with the mumamery! I am ready and waiting!"

"There is still another charge against you, Lofty Dick. You fired at me, with intent to kill. But that charge can wait a little longer. You sinned against Snapper Johnny first, and it is but proper that you should wash away that crime, before answering for another."

"Brocky Bill, bring out the rope!"

Until now, Queen Dixie had remained silent, but as she heard this, she murmured a prayer for mercy in his ear.

"Ay! mercy such as you and he meant to show me!" grated King Saul, his lips close to her ear, his eyes flashing fire.

CHAPTER XVII.

LOFTY DICK IS ELEVATED.

No ears save hers could have caught those words, and the Rustlers were far too busy with their preparations for the punishment of Lofty Dick, to note the glance of almost devilish hatred which accompanied them. Thus it was that Queen Dixie alone knew that all had been discovered; that from the moment of his return to the desert sink from the prison, King Saul had been playing a cunning part and abiding his time, only to strike the more surely in the end.

Faint and heart-sick, she leaned back against the wall, a red mist-like blood floating before her vision and shutting out the rapidly-shifting figures of the outlaws, save through that dizzy, dancing medium, as though they were but the weird phantasmagoria of a nightmare-dream.

Like one in a dream, too, Queen Dixie seemed to hear buzzing in her ears, tearing through her brain, the many speeches which King Saul had made to her on the question of fidelity. Like Caesar's wife, she must be absolutely above the faintest shadow of suspicion. All other sins he could forgive and forget, in his great love for her whom he had chosen from all the world, to become his queen; but infidelity, though it be merely in thought, in her dreams, never. Let suspicion once enter his brain, and love would flee his heart, never to return, for a deadly hatred would fill both brain and heart so full that there would be room for naught else.

Thus he had warned her, time and again, only to have his black moods kissed away and the loving smiles restored. And when their echo had fairly died away, Queen Dixie thought no more of the fierce words, for at that time her heart was hard enough to all save her king, and she knew that she could charm away the black devils as often as they should return.

Thus had she gone on, dallying with danger, playing with fire, her only intimate associate besides King Saul, being the dandy Rustler, Lofty Dick. He was polite, well educated, and possessed many tastes akin to her own. King Saul had watched them until he was satisfied that neither had the faintest sentiment for the other to which even his jealousy could offer an objection, and then he would intrust his queen particularly to the care of Lofty Dick, whenever he went away from the band.

Thus matters went on until one day not more

than a month prior to the date on which King Saul was captured by his enemies and cast into the jail from which we saw him escape. Then the young couple learned the truth, saw the shoal toward which they had all this time been drifting, but it was too late to avoid it now.

Queen Dixie shuddered convulsively as she recalled the events of that day, when first her eyes were opened, and she felt that at last she comprehended the full import of the word love. Then and now—what a horrible contrast!

Under cover of her flowing robes she felt an acute pain as the fingers of King Saul pinched her, and like one in a dream, she heard his voice hissing in her ear the words:

"Come, Dixie; rouse up and play your part. Would you bring disgrace upon yourself as well as upon me?"

The blood-red mist passed away, and she looked straight into the hard face of the King of the Rustlers, a smile upon her lips, cold and icy calm.

"You need not fear me, King Saul. I am a child no longer, but a woman. You have crushed my heart with your foul suspicions, but you shall see that I am more careful of your reputation and honor than you are yourself."

His great blue eyes looked piercingly into her dark orbs, as though seeking to read the truth therein, but if he thought to awe her thus, he was foiled. Instead, his were the eyes which were forced to falter, then turn away, unable to maintain the keen duel any longer.

All this had passed with great rapidity, and as King Saul turned from his queen, the Rustlers were just ready for his further orders, standing before him, two men grasping Lofty Dick, around whose neck Brocky Bill had fitted the noose of a stout rawhide lasso.

"You have been tried and found guilty, Lofty Dick, of the second highest crime which our laws recognize—that of losing your nerve when the lives of your fellow Rustlers depended upon it. If I chose, I could sentence you to death, and not one of all the family but would applaud the justice of my judgment. I say I could do this; but I am strongly inclined to be merciful toward you, if only because this is your first offense of the sort, and that we would sorely miss your quick eye and ready hand in the days to come, when hot work may be reasonably expected. Even now, if you will acknowledge your crime—for weakness of nerve is no less—and beg for mercy, I may decide to put you on probation—"

Lofty Dick interrupted his slow speech with a short, hard laugh, full of bitter scorn and hatred.

"Bah! you are saying one thing with your lips, while your eyes sing an altogether different tune. You have no more intention of sparing me or showing mercy, now you have got me fairly beneath your heel, than you would show compassion to a rattlesnake that had just sunk its poison-laden fangs into your flesh. Your first thought would be to crush its head; you intend to serve me the same way, and are only wasting your breath in trying to make me beg for what you never mean to grant. Get down to business. Put me to the test, and see whether or no I have lost my nerve!"

The Rustlers stared agape at the prisoner as he swiftly poured out these words of scorn and defiance, and all save the two men who held his arms, and Brocky Bill with the rope, shrunk back from Lofty Dick, expecting no less than that King Saul would give way to one of those frightful outbursts which had won for him the name of Spitfire.

But their alarm was without foundation. A grim smile passed over the face of the King of the Rustlers, while his big blue eyes glittered wickedly; but that was all. His voice was cold and even as he spoke again:

"Change that rope from around the prisoner's neck to his armpits. I promised you a night of sport. I promised him an opportunity to prove that his nerve had not wholly left him. Perhaps we can combine the two."

Rapidly the long, bony fingers of Brocky Bill effected the change, and then he looked inquiringly toward King Saul.

"Rig your rope and swing him up. Work lively!"

In the center of the ceiling a massive ring-bolt had been fixed, and at a motion from Brocky Bill, two of the Rustlers placed themselves directly beneath this, face to face, their strong arms intertwined, their broad shoulders braced against each other. Up this living pedestal the gaunt old sinner nimbly climbed, passing the free end of the rope through the heavy ring which hung from the bolt, drawing the slack through as he leaped to the floor.

Lofty Dick was led by his two guards directly beneath the ring, and as though they comprehended the intentions of King Saul without further explanation, they rapidly and tightly bound his legs together at the ankle, leaving his arms still secured behind him by the handcuffs.

"Bring out a fresh supply of pipes, Brocky Bill," commanded the chief, his voice stern and cold. "We'll not only test the nerve of the prisoner, but that of his comrades, one and all, as well. If there are any among us whose nerves are beginning to give way beneath the

strain of the life we lead, the sooner the truth is discovered, the safer for all concerned."

Queen Dixie, despite the terrible restraint which she had placed upon herself, could not entirely restrain a sigh of intense relief as she heard these words. King Saul heard it, and swiftly glanced into her face. For an instant she hesitated, fearing to still further confirm his suspicions of the truth, but only for a breath—then she murmured:

"Be lenient, my love, my king! You will never regret it, I solemnly promise you!"

"You heard his defiance?" he breathed, in the same guarded tones. "What would the men think if I spared him now?"

"That you showed yourself a king in fact, as in name!" was the passionate reply, while the dark eyes revealed far more than their owner had any intention of permitting, but her interest was so great as to overshadow all prudence.

"He is young and hot-headed. He feels that he has been wronged and falsely accused. That makes him speak sharper than he would if his brain was not heated. Spare him now, and you will have a brave, true, honest servant for all time!"

King Saul made no immediate reply, but the heart of Queen Dixie beat lighter as she saw the faint smile upon his face as he turned again to the prisoner and his comrades.

"Lofty Dick, you say that your nerve is stronger than death itself. It may be so; I hope it, for your own sake. But you know that it is a maxim of ours, to take nothing for granted, when there is a method of putting it to the test."

"You have sinned, according to our rules and laws. You will make reparation as prescribed by the same. If you pass through the ordeal safely, the matter will never again be broached by mortal man. If you fail, you shall receive Rustler honors over your grave."

"One word to you, comrades of mine as well as of the accused. It is now time for you to play your part, and I expect you to do your duty, without fear or favor."

"The prisoner will be drawn clear of the floor. A shortened pipe will be placed in his mouth. He will be set to whirling around at the end of the rope, and at the word, which I will take upon myself to give, the bowl of the pipe must be shattered by a bullet."

"If the marksman fails to shatter the pipe, either bowl or stem, at his first attempt, he will forfeit all share in the proceeds of our next raid. If he proves so clumsy or unsteady nerved as to wound the accused, though he draw only a single drop of blood, he shall take his turn at playing target, as soon as Lofty Dick passes through the ordeal."

"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink, against his will," coldly uttered Lofty Dick. "What if I refuse to become pipe-holder?"

"I trust you will not be so foolish," was the grave response; "for in that case, the pipe will have to be tied between your jaws. The sentence has been pronounced, and must be carried out to the very letter. Do you refuse?"

"On second thoughts, no. You would say that I lacked the nerve, and that would give me the trouble of giving you the lie, once more. Go on with your rat-killing!"

"Bring me one of those pipes, Brocky Bill," added King Saul. "Beauty before all else! Queen Dixie graciously consents to open the ball."

Taking the pipe which the old man offered him, King Saul turned to his fair mate, with a smile upon his face.

"Set your gallant knights a brave example, oh fair and gracious queen. Break the stem and let the play go on!" he said, his voice ringing out clear and distinct, as he handed the unfortunate woman the clay pipe, bowing low as though in deep reverence, but in reality to conceal from the view of his eagerly watching men the motion of his lips as he swiftly hissed: "Refuse and I'll know that you are guilty!"

With the calmness of despair Queen Dixie took the pipe and holding it up so that all could see, snapped the frail stem, leaving a fragment only an inch or two in length attached to the bowl. Still in silence she handed the bowl to King Saul, who laughed as he tossed it to Rocky Bill.

"Look to it, my gallant knights, that you do not let a lady outdo you in the matter of nerve. Follow her example, and if the trial ends without a balk not one among you all, including the accused, need blush for lack of nerve."

Lofty Dick flashed one swift glance into the snow-pale face of his queen as he opened his lips to receive the pipe, taking the stem in until the bowl fairly pressed against his red lips. For a moment her eyes closed, so clearly did she read the meaning of that glance, emphasized by the action.

Plain as though he had shouted forth the words at the top of his voice, Lofty Dick had bidden her fear not, but to send the bullet straight through his brain, and thus, perhaps, save herself. As for him, his doom was sealed, and a speedy release would be a blessing.

Thus spoke his eyes, his face, in that brief look, and for one instant Queen Dixie felt that

she would obey the man she had learned to love so well—loved never so truly, so ardently as now when she contemplated slaying him.

"One of my pistols here, Brocky Bill!" cried King Saul, sharply. "Her royal highness is impatient to open the ball."

As the weapon was handed him, King Saul passed it to his queen, then made a signal, at which the accused was drawn up clear of the floor and set to spinning rapidly around, his guards falling back a few paces.

Queen Dixie took the pistol and raised the hammer with a hand that was steady as fate itself. Her lips were tightly compressed, her face as white as that of a corpse, but her eyes blazed vividly as she brought the weapon to a level.

All eyes save those of King Saul were riveted upon the white bowl against the lips of Lofty Dick. He was watching Queen Dixie like a hungry hawk watches a chicken, and never once removed his eyes until the sharp report broke the breathless silence, followed by a wild cheer from the intensely excited Rustlers, which told King Saul that the difficult and dangerous feat had been successfully performed.

Instantly his hand clasped the smoking revolver, which was yielded up without an effort to retain it, but a low, bitter speech hissed into his ears from the woman:

"Had I missed my aim, and injured him, the second shot would have had your brain for the target!"

"I anticipated as much, and was on my guard," he retorted, with a low laugh, as he bowed his head and seemed to be congratulating her upon her success.

After this, there was little delay, King Saul calling the marksmen by name, and they advancing to the foot of the throne after snapping off the pipe stem, took their shots.

Brocky Bill was the first one summoned, and he knocked off such a small bit that King Saul frowned. The veteran's habitual whine was doubly accented as he saw this.

"It'd be onpolite to show as much grit as the queen, now wouldn't it? I kin stan' the loss o' the sheer o' the next raid, but I'd never git over hittin' of the lad, now would I?"

His prudent example was followed by his mates. They were on their metal, knowing the severe penalty for failure, and having often performed the pipe dance, possessed both the skill and nerve essential. One after another, they performed the feat, until the last pipe was broken, and Lofty Dick cried:

"If you are through with this infernal mummery, let me down, and I'll fight any one or the whole kit of you, to settle forever the question of nerve and grit. Even you, King Saul!"

"Wait a bit, my dear sir," coldly replied Spitfire Saul, with a hard, menacing laugh. "There remains one more pipe to be broken, for I claim my right to prove my nerve with the rest of these honest fellows. I know that it is unusual, but as you had one shot at me, it is no more than right that I should burn a little powder in return. Am I not right, men?"

There could be but one reply to a query worded like this, and a general murmur of assent went up from the crowd.

"In other words, you mean to murder me, having failed to thrust the dirty work off on your followers!" boldly cried Lofty Dick, his blue eyes ablaze with hatred and defiance. "You are wise! If I ever had another chance, I would kill you!"

"If I fail to break the pipe, I'll pay the penalty, never fear," laughed King Saul, snapping the stem short to the bowl.

Lofty Dick made no resistance, but clinched the stem in his jaws, then was set whirling rapidly. King Saul leveled his weapon and with a swift aim, pulled trigger.

With a piercing shriek of horror, Queen Dixie fainted, and would have fallen from her seat, only for the swift grasp of King Saul, for *though the bowl was broken, Lofty Dick was dead!*

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BRIDE OF DEATH.

EVERY eye had been riveted upon the whirling figure of Lofty Dick and the pipe-bowl which rested snugly against his lips, no longer vividly red, but dull and ashen, like those of a man who feels the near approach of death.

Not that one among the entire gathering doubted either the nerve or skill of King Saul, for time and again had he given them indisputable evidence of possessing both qualities in a most extraordinary degree; but after the reckless defiance which Lofty Dick had hurled in the teeth of the King of the Rustlers, very few among them all could bring themselves to believe that King Saul would permit him to escape scot free. But neither did they anticipate how surely the chief meant to revenge himself, and a general cry of horror broke from their lips as they beheld the pipe-bowl shattered to atoms by the bullet, while the form of Lofty Dick was exactly facing the throne.

Crushing the bowl, driving through teeth, flesh and bone, the battered lead severed the spinal-cord near where it joined the skull. A convulsive twitching of the muscles, a quiver-

ing of the limbs, then the golden-crowned head drooped forward upon his breast.

"Hold hard all!" thundered Spitfire Saul, scarcely waiting until the echoes of his death-shot had died away. "Up with your hands, every mother's son o' ye! And empty, too! The man who hesitates long enough for me to spot him will need no funeral sermon. Steady, now!"

Swiftly as he had spoken, the last words had not left his lips before each and every one of the Rustlers were standing with their hands elevated high above their heads, trying their best to face their dreaded chief without a visible evidence of the fear which filled their hearts, but with far from complete success.

Though he had ostensibly disarmed himself before the punishment of Lofty Dick began, Spitfire Saul now held a cocked revolver in either hand, covering the score men before him, his eyes glittering with a fire that seemed to scorch whatever it fell upon.

"I broke the pipe, as I was bound to do, to complete the punishment due the injury which that dead dog inflicted upon Snapper Johnny. And to save both time and trouble, I broke it after a fashion that amply rewarded rank and double treachery, as well as carelessness or cunning design.

"You all know that I have just escaped from captivity. It was not from either carelessness or recklessness that I fell into the hands of the enemy. I was sold, betrayed, by the two beings in whom I placed the most implicit trust—in whose hands I not only left my honor, but my life and liberty. How they rewarded my trust, you have heard, but only in part. Some day I will give you the entire history, from its inception to the bitter end. Now, I need only swear by the sacred oath that binds us together in fellowship, that all I charge is true as death itself, and can be proven beyond the possibility of a doubt.

"Lofty Dick was one of the traitors, and the woman whom you have thus far regarded as your queen, as my wife, is the other."

Not a sound from the Rustlers as Spitfire Saul paused in his rapid explanation, his voice too husky and strained for him to proceed, just then. But their faces spoke far louder and more plainly than words could. Wonder, horror and a growing doubt, all were written there. Not for Lofty Dick; in the black accusation which King Saul had brought against their idolized queen, they alike forgot him and his sickening fate. He hung there, slowly turning round and around as the rope untwisted, the blood running down his breast and already beginning to drip upon the floor, marking out a loathsome circle upon the hard-beaten clay. A ghastly sight, but no one had eyes or thoughts for it just then.

"You have heard my explanation, men," Spitfire Saul resumed, his voice colder, harder, but with that devilish light still glowing in his great eyes. "I have taken oath to its absolute truth. I will do more, when the proper time comes, for though you are bound by your vow to believe whatever I tell you, I will not stand on that privilege. You shall have the entire evidence of the treachery shown me by Queen Dixie and her paramour, Lofty Dick. I can prove that they sold me to my enemies, for gold. I can prove that this woman, when I was taken alive and cast into jail, fearing lest I should escape the doom she and her lover had designed, disguised herself and entering the town, spent her gold—stolen from me, by the way—lavishly, hiring ruffians to raise the cry of lynch-law and collect the mob to drag me out to death by the rope. I swear to you that I can prove all this, and even more.

"Now I ask you, not as your chief, but as one man speaking to another: do you blame me for having killed Lofty Dick? Was I not bound to do so, by the oath I have taken in common with you all, as a Rustler? And not only for that charge, but because he foully attempted my death, but just now.

"Snapper Johnny was right in his double charge. I suspected the traitor of meaning mischief, and watched him closely. I saw him shoot Snapper, not through carelessness or lack of nerve, but to so startle and confuse him that he would not notice what followed; then he whirled and shot at me. I barely escaped his shot, by throwing myself over to one side. You can see the print of the lead on the wall behind me, now.

"Again I ask you: did I sin in killing the traitor?"

Without an exception, the voices of the Rustlers were raised in the negative, and King Saul nodded approvingly, as he lowered the weapons which he had all the time kept covering them. The signal was understood, and the upraised hands came down, though the Rustlers still maintained their places.

"In keeping my oath to punish all traitors with death, I have also avenged my wrongs," continued Spitfire Saul, speaking more evenly, his voice less strained and unnatural. "As for this traitor," touching the senseless form of Queen Dixie with one elbow, but without glancing toward her, "she is a woman, and therefore sacred, so far as life goes. True, she is full

as guilty as Lofty Dick, and equally deserves punishment, but that must come in a different shape. Her doom is to live on, and learn to repent. In slaying Lofty Dick before her very eyes, I have dealt her a blow that hurts her far worse than the mere loss of life, and one that she will feel more and more acutely the longer she lives. Both awake and sleeping, it will haunt her; a nightmare from which she will never be able to escape, no matter how fast or how far she may flee!

"Gentlemen, you have had the sport I promised you; now to work. You will mount your horses and make your way to the old rendezvous in the hills. Play the old trick, of scattering widely, that the winds may the more easily blot out your trail. In all probability, I will be at the rendezvous before you; but if not, await my coming. You can go."

The Rustlers moved uneasily, at the same time interchanging covert glances, at seeing which, the brows of King Saul quickly contracted, and the evil light in his eyes deepened; but notwithstanding this, Brocky Bill, hat in hand, his whine deeply accentuated, shuffled to the foot of the throne.

"Blow my durned fool' brains out, ef you like, boss, but I cain't help axin' ye to jess lis'en to me, this once!"

"Speak out, and cut it short!" sternly demanded Spitfire Saul, his fingers tightening their grip upon the butt of his revolver. "I can forgive you much, old man, for I know that you are faithful and true as the day is long; but don't try me too far. I'm in an ugly humor tonight."

"It's the missus, boss," the veteran whined, tears in both voice and eyes, as he cast a shuddering glance from the chief to the deathlike countenance of the insensible woman. "No doubt she went wrong, sence you say so, but fer all that, she's a woman, an' she bin mighty cluss to the hearts o' us rough critters. Not one of the fambly but would 'a' laid down his life at her biddin', an' counted it a thing to thank her fer. Say that you won't—won't butcher her—"

King Saul impatiently checked him with up-lifted hand.

"As you say, old mate, she is a woman, and therefore her life is sacred, particularly to me, whom she has called husband—whom she loved, before that cursed boy came between us with his baby face. I swear to you, one and all, on my honor as your king, that I will not harm her further. Is that plain enough?"

Whatever reply Brocky Bill meant to make, was cut short by the subdued, but none the less earnest cheer which burst from the lips of the Rustlers, telling how powerful was the hold of Queen Dixie, disgraced though she had been, traitress though she had been proven, upon their rude, fiery love.

"Enough!" cried King Saul, with an impatient gesture. "You have my orders: see that you carry them out without delay. I will meet you at the rendezvous in the Hills, and then we will strike a blow that will show our enemies King Saul and his merry riders are still alive and full of poison! Go!"

Without another word they filed out of the building, and as he bent his ear in listening, King Saul could hear them preparing their horses for the road.

A faint moan from the woman beside him, a slight stir of her hands, attracted his gaze, and he saw that she was gradually recovering her senses.

With a catlike leap, he left the throne, and reaching the one door, closed and barred it, then returned to the throne, bending over and gazing fixedly into the face of the woman whom he had once loved with all the ardor of his fiery heart, but whom he now hated even more completely.

In one hand he held a handkerchief, ready to clap to her lips, should she arouse with a cry, as he feared; but this was an unnecessary precaution, for he could hear the rapid clatter of hoofs as the Rustlers rode away from the desert sink, long ere her senses were restored sufficiently for her to realize her present situation.

Producing a small pair of handcuffs from beneath his robes, King Saul snapped them upon Queen Dixie's wrists, laughing savagely as her eyes opened with a start, at the chilling touch of the polished steel.

"Good!" he hissed, his eyes glowing redly, his huge mustaches curling so as to show the white, pointed teeth beneath the hair. "You are awake, again. I'm glad of that, for I would not have you miss a single move as I play my little game of revenge and retribution!"

"What is the matter?" Queen Dixie faltered, her brain still confused from that horrible shock, and unable to recall what had happened, until her startled gaze fell upon the body of Lofty Dick, now hanging motionless from the ceiling.

One instant of frightful silence, then a wild shriek burst from her ashen lips, as she strove to fling herself from the throne, her frenzied gaze riveted upon the corpse. But King Saul caught her in his powerful arms, and forcing her back, swiftly bound her fast to the seat, growling:

"Yelp on, sweet Dixie, if it gives you any comfort! We're alone now, with Lofly Dick for our only auditor, and I am not afraid of his interfering, passionately as the foolish boy must have worshiped you, to dare my vengeance. Sing on, my nightingale! Your voice sounds very sweetly in my ears, and I would not lose a note for all the gold in the Territory. It is part of my revenge—part of the price I demand for the wife I have lost!"

So horribly malignant was his tone, so savagely malignant his look, that Queen Dixie was recalled to a sense of her own peril, and her screams died away in a low moan as she relaxed her efforts to break away from his deadly grip.

"Obstinate as all the rest of your cursed sex!" laughed Spitfire Saul. "Give you permission to scream, and you lapse into silence. All the better. You can suffer just as much, and can listen to my farewell speech, at the same time, without making me strain my throat."

"You threw me over for that boy. If you had been content to follow the usual programme, and run away to enjoy yourselves, I don't know as I would have felt so badly; but you added insult to injury. You plotted my death between you. You resolved to enjoy my hardly accumulated wealth, while Lofly Dick wore my shoes as King of the Rustlers. Taken all together, it proved a bigger dose than I could swallow; so I kicked. I let the fool have free run, for a time, then I clipped his wings. By that means, I fancy I made you taste a little of the bitter beforehand. Now—wait and see!"

Leaping from the throne, Spitfire Saul drew a knife and leaping into the air, slashed the rawhide lasso in two, suffering the corpse to fall to the floor with a sickening thud that drew a faint, gasping moan from the lips of Queen Dixie.

He laughed malignantly at this, but said nothing, as he rapidly stripped off his robes of mock royalty, then stooped over the corpse and removed the handcuffs, afterward cutting the strong cords with which his ankles had been secured.

This accomplished he proceeded to dress the corpse in the gaudy robes which he had himself discarded, and lifting the body in his arms, bore it to the throne, placing it in a sitting posture close beside the trembling, shrinking woman.

"Bah!" he cried, mockingly, as he observed this. "You were not so fastidious, but a few hours ago. I'll warrant you never shrunk away from the living lover; then why should you do so from the dead bridegroom? Is it because you are so modest? Because I am looking on? Never let that trouble you, my precious. Look on me as only the priest who unites two loving hearts, not as the deserted, betrayed husband!"

Uttered in that tone, his words were horrible beyond description, and sick, fainting Queen Dixie would have fallen from the throne, only for the bonds which King Saul had applied.

With the severed lasso by which Lofly Dick had been suspended from the ceiling, he bound the corpse to the throne, taking several turns around Queen Dixie's waist and drawing her close to the corpse, before he knotted it.

All the time uttering the most cutting taunts his inflamed imagination could devise, King Saul forced one arm of the wretched woman around the bloody neck of the dead man, clasping one ring of the handcuffs around her wrist. He bent the left arm of the corpse in the same fashion about her throat, forcing their heads so close together that their long, curling locks intermingled, and then snapped the other ring around the other hand thus treated. With a second pair he joined their other hands together before them, then stepped back to gloat over his devilish work, laughing hoarsely, madly, his eyes glowing like those of a madman or a veritable fiend.

"Thus do I wed you, my children, in the holy bonds of padlock! And what King Saul hath joined together, not even death or the devil can put asunder!"

He went still further, but his words and actions cannot find a place in this page. For the time being, he was a madman. It is only charitable to believe that he did not know what he was doing or saying, at the time. The wrongs which he had suffered at the hands and through the plottings of these two persons, drove all humanity from his heart and brain. He had thoughts only for vengeance, and studied only how to make his blows felt the most acutely.

He knotted their curling locks together, then drew back again, to view the frightful spectacle, and satisfy himself that there was nothing more he could do to complete that horrible embrace, or render it more lasting.

"Farewell, my precious children!" he cried, in a tone of hideous mockery, as he pretended to dash away the tears from his eyes. "I must leave you, now, but I have no fears that you will mourn my absence, at least before the first mad transports of wedded bliss are growing cold!"

"When you weary of your bridegroom's ca-

resses, Queen Dixie, call for your devoted servants, and they will come—if your voice is loud enough. Once more, good-by! Be good to yourselves, my children!" and with a low bow, he turned and left the room, locking the door behind him, leaving the lights burning in the lamps against the walls.

Left them alone, bound together, the living and the dead, beyond all possibility of freedom, without aid from others!

CHAPTER XIX.

AN IMPORTANT CAPTURE.

"HALT! Han's up, you ole sinner, or down goes your meat-house fer keeps!"

Leaning far forward in the saddle, diligently plying his huge, bull-hide boots, the heels of which were armed with rusty spurs, against the steaming flanks of his horse, a wayworn, dilapidated-looking traveler had been pressing on over the dreary desert, like one exceedingly anxious to reach his destination. But as those swiftly uttered words came to his ears, and he caught a glimpse of several human forms rising from the grass which crowned the little knoll directly in his front, covering him with their rifles, he abruptly drew rein.

"Durn it all!" he uttered in a pettish whine, as he cowered lower in his saddle, one hand stealing toward the revolver at his side, while from beneath his shaggy eyebrows, he cast a swift glance to either side, as though to estimate the chances for and against a bold dash. "Cain't ye see that I ain't the game wuth the pickin'? Ain't got a red cent o' money, rags fer kiverin', an' a durned ole boss that kin gallop all day onto a billiard-table!"

"What ye take us fer, anyhow, you durned ole crow-bait?" indignantly demanded the man who had uttered the peremptory challenge, his weather-beaten countenance flushing hotly as he glared over his leveled tube at the cringing traveler.

"P'izen thieves ur pesky Rustlers!" was the defiant squeal, as the old man suddenly wrenched his horse around, at the same time casting himself behind its body, but clinging to the pommel with one hand, while he jerked forth his revolver and took a snap-shot at the man who had halted him.

A howling curse of angry pain, proved that his lead had not been entirely wasted, but before the jaded horse could take a second leap in flight, several sharp reports rung out, and with an almost human cry of agony, the poor creature plunged heavily forward, dead ere it touched the ground.

The traveler must have anticipated something like this, when he uttered that defiance and fired his shot, but notwithstanding, his horse fell so suddenly that it caught him unprepared, and before he could regain his feet, or secure either the revolver which the ugly fall had knocked out of his hand, or draw another from his belt, the enemy were upon him, and he fell back with a gasping groan as a rifle-butt crashed down across his skull.

A little cry of wonder broke from the man who dealt that blow, for with the dilapidated hat, off flew a mass of coarse white hair, leaving an altogether different looking man from the one they had halted: smooth-shorn face, dark almost as an Indian; black hair, close cropped; a broad, purple scar, running from one ear almost to his chin.

But neither he nor his fellows were men to give way to surprise long, while there was business to be attended to, and sixty seconds later the old man was disarmed, his hands tightly tied behind his back, and the noose of a lasso fitted snugly about his throat.

The force of the blow had been broken by his hat and matted wig, and scarcely were these precautions taken, than the prisoner began a desperate struggle, ceasing only when one of his captors thrust the cold muzzle of a cocked revolver full between his eyes.

"Simmer down, ole coon, an' don't make us waste powder!"

"It's a durned shame that a honest critter cain't take a ride on 'portant business, 'bout hevin' a wheen o' p'izen road-agents jump him an' butcher his boss—"

"Which we'll butcher more'n the boss, ef you don't let up that clatter. Road-agent nothin'! Do we look like them p'izen cattle, ye durned ole mole?"

"Looks don't count, now'days," doggedly. "Ef you ain't no sech, why did ye stop me an' shoot my boss? Was I hurtin' you? Not much! I was ridin' on a matter of life an' death—"

"Whar to an' whar fer?"

"To the Debonay ranch. Take me thar, an' I'll go bail the gent'll sw'ar that I'm on the squar," he eagerly replied.

"Ef you be, whar'd you git that boss?" demanded another of the scouting party, suspiciously. "I don't know you from Mother Adam, but I kin sw'ar to the critter. That p'izen cuss, Windy Jess, rid it through these parts when Spitfire Saul an' his gang made thar last raid. Whar'd you git it?"

"Traded fer it, durn ye, an' that's enough.

Won't give ary other yelp tell you let me go or take me to see ole Debonay."

"Ef the boss says so, all right. Must see him fust."

"Boss who?"

"Lieutenant Boyd, o' the Rangers. Mebbe ye know him?"

"No, I don't, nur I don't want to, nuther!" sullenly. "You want to take me to the ranch in a heap hurry, or you'll never be sorry fer it but once—an' that'll be fer all time!"

"The shortest way is 'round by the camp. They ain't no hosses nigher, an' you'd fall all to pieces afore you could make the ranch a-foot-back. Stump along, now, lively!"

The prisoner pleaded and threatened by turns, but alike in vain. His captors strode along without reply, and if he lagged, the well-greased noose of the lasso closed around his throat, and he was obliged to mend his pace, or be thrown upon his face and dragged at the end of the rope.

Half an hour later the party entered a clump of low trees, where they were met by two men, both old acquaintances of the reader, Lieutenant Mark Boyd and Genteel Guy.

With a low cry the latter leaped forward, and, grasping the prisoner's shoulder, stared intently into his face for a full minute, then laughed exultantly, as he cried:

"I told you my turn would come, Fred Bloodgood, alias Windy Jess, alias the devil-knows-what all!"

"Which I ain't, nur you cain't prove it, nuther!" growled the fellow, his snaky eyes glittering venomously. "I'm a honest—"

"You lie!" hissed another of the Rangers, thrusting his anger-convulsed face close to that of the prisoner. "You're Windy Jess! I give you that wound on the face fer killin' my little brother! An' now I'll kill you!"

A strong hand caught his uplifted arm and tore the bared blade from his hand, while Mark Boyd sternly cried:

"Back to your place, Bevins. If this man proves to be the outlaw, as charged, he shall be fitly punished; but you can do no butchering here. Fall back, and wait your turn."

Sullenly the Ranger obeyed. Few men cared to dispute him, when Mark Boyd spoke in that tone.

The bronzed face of the captive turned a shade paler as he realized that he was recognized beyond all hope of denial; but still he did not despair. He held one more card, and that he played with desperate calmness.

"It's all a lie, an' ef you hang me you'll find out you bin doin' murder one o' these days. But even ef I was the p'izen critter you think," pointedly addressing Genteel Guy, "you dasset's retch me to my hurt. Kill me, an' the ones you love better'n your own life 'll pay the forfeit. Let me go free, an' I'll give you two the richest pay you ever got for ary one life!"

"What do you mean?" sharply demanded Genteel Guy.

"Set me loose, an' I'll tell. Keep or hang me, an' you'll still find out—but too late to do any good."

The leader of those who had taken him prisoner now came forward and hastily related what the fellow had told them when first taken. Genteel Guy laughed scornfully.

"Bah! you were riding there to gain the money Pierre Debonay promised you for restoring his son. You think he will intercede for you; no doubt he would, but he'll never get the chance. Lieutenant Boyd, as one of your men, I demand that this scoundrel be placed on trial for his life. I charge him with being a member of Spitfire Saul's gang of cutthroats, with murder and theft."

"You'll weep tears of blood for this, I tell you, Guy Abbey!" hissed the prisoner, throwing off all disguise in his anger. "You have pronounced your own doom in uttering those words. With me dies my secret. You have your warning."

No attention was paid to his stormy speech. The Rangers set about forming a wild-wood court, acting promptly, as though perfectly familiar with the details of just such scenes; and no doubt they were.

They had too often lost the just rewards of their hard riding and harder fighting, by trusting their captures to the hands of the so called proper authorities. Money would hire unscrupulous lawyers, and even grease the palm of justice. Red-banded murderers would be turned loose to take up their career just where it had been temporarily abandoned. With cash at their back, criminals laughed at the courts of justice.

Sullenly the prisoner watched the proceedings. A jury was selected by lot. Lieutenant Boyd took the seat of judge. The prisoner was brought before him, and then the charges were made. To these, one and all, he gave a flat denial.

Genteel Guy swore that he was the man who had introduced himself as Fred Bloodgood, nearly one month before that day. He told how he had been knocked senseless, by a blow from behind, then left bound and gagged upon the prairie, while the accused rode on to the Debonay ranch. He briefly detailed the man-

ner of his escape, and how he and Mark Boyd hastened to the ranch, only to see the outlaw riding away.

Lieutenant Boyd rose from his seat, and took up the thread of evidence where Genteel Guy left off, detailing the brief chase, and how it ended in his defeat. He produced the bit of paper which had been pinned to his breast, while he lay stunned by that fall from his horse, and read it aloud. That it had been written by the prisoner, he was prepared to swear. And the signature attached, was that of Windy Jess.

Other evidence followed, so directly implicating the prisoner, that even his bull-dog courage began to fail him. He was proved a thief, one of Spitfire Saul's band of Rustlers, and the death of at least one human being was fixed upon him.

When the evidence was all in, the case was given to the jury. Without hesitation, they pronounced him guilty.

The judge rose again, and addressed the prisoner:

"Prisoner at the bar, you have had a fair and thorough trial, according to the laws which govern the Rangers. You are convicted of theft, robbery, and murder. Before I pronounce sentence upon you, is there anything you can urge in your own defense, or reasons to give why I should deal with you more leniently than your crimes so richly deserve?"

"Nothin' more than that the charges is all a lie, or fit onto other shoulders than mine," said the accused, with desperate calmness. "I don't deny but that I've rid with the gang of Spitfire Saul, but it was as a spy ag'in' 'em, not as one o' his cutthroats. Take me to the fort, an' I'll prove that I'm a scout an' spy, lawfully a'p'inted fer jest the work I've been doin'. Hang me, an' you'll hev to answer fer it, to your betters. I give ye plain warnin'."

"We will risk that. You have been proven guilty, and—"

"Stop a bit, boss," and there was an expression of satanic malignity upon the face of the prisoner. "You're 'gaged to a young lady named Ora Ainsley. Kill me, an' you worse then kill her. The same fer Lucille Debonay. Let me go free, or give me time to prove I'm what I say, an' I'll give the hull thing away. Refuse—waal you kin take what follers!"

A sharp whistle from one of the guards stationed out in the prairie grass, interrupted the words with which the judge was about to reply to this speech, and as all eyes were turned in that direction, a horseman was seen riding swiftly toward the timber island, his right hand rising and falling as he swung his rawhide quirt savagely. Even at that distance it could be seen that his horse was covered with foam and sweat, reeling and staggering as it came on.

A cry burst from the band as they saw the poor animal throw up its head, then plunge heavily forward, heart-broken by its terrible race against time. They saw the rider shoot over its head, alighting upon his feet, rebounding as though made of rubber, then dash straight on to the motte.

"It's Feather-foot!" exclaimed Mark Boyd, his eyes glittering vividly, as he left his seat and hastened toward the edge of the timber. "He must bring important tidings, to kill his horse and race after that fashion!"

As the runner came closer, it could be seen that he wore the garb of a partially civilized Indian. His form was about the medium height, but round and admirably proportioned, and he ran with the low, level motion of a true race-horse.

"What is it, Feather-foot?" demanded Boyd, as the Indian slackened his pace on nearing them.

The red lips parted to reply, but instead came a guttural exclamation of wonder, as the keen black eyes glanced past them, and caught sight of the dark, scarred visage of the prisoner, who was looking toward him.

"You ketch 'im—durn rascal? How do it?" bluntly demanded the runner, as he pressed past the lieutenant, and entered the timber island, pausing only when within arm's-length of Windy Jess.

"One, two—heap time you fool Rangers, ole boy; dis time you git ketch, plenty tight, eh?" laughed Feather-foot. "Me tell you so, long time 'go, but you say dis way: 'Durn bull-head Rangers no ketch Talk-talk—no got git-up 'nough! Freeze up tight to bottom, day ketch me—you bet! What say now?"

"Do you know this fellow?" demanded Boyd, sharply.

"Know dis man? Bet you, me squeal mighty loud to snicker," laughed Feather-foot, with a comical attempt to master the slang he had heard among the Rangers.

"Who is he? What's his name?"

"Talk-talk, sometimes; nudder time, call him Heap-blow."

"Did you ever know him as Windy Jess?"

"Dat name right!" exclaimed the Indian, his black eyes glittering as he nodded his head vigorously. "Me know it mean plenty pow-wow, alle same. He 'long King Saul. Big man dere."

As he spoke the prisoner was watching him closely. He saw a trim-built form, handsome

features, long, straight hair, cut square across the forehead, reaching almost to the eyes. His face grew paler, as he saw that further denial was vain.

"If that copper-colored devil isn't a ghost, he's one of the very men you're hunting for!" he cried, hoarsely. "He is the image of a red-skin called Feather-foot, one of Spitfire Saul's gang, who's taken more scalps than—"

"Heap lie dat!" interposed Feather-foot, his eyes flashing. "Me ride 'long King Saul—dat so. Me scout, spy, fo' Ranger men. You 'long dat time, when all say Feather-foot go up flume. Me tumble, yes. Me lay plenty still, like dead dog. Den when you ride 'way plenty far, git up, do so!" applying his thumb to his nose and swiftly twirling his fingers. "Fool you dat time, chuck up! Find out all want; mark all face down here," tapping his hair-hidden forehead. "Know you now, Talk-talk; bumpy you be sizzle-burn!" pointing downward with one finger, leering into the face of the captive, with a diabolical grin on his copper colored features.

"Did you know that we had captured this rascal, that you came in so hot, Feather-foot?" asked Genteel Guy.

"No. Kill hoss so git here heap soon. Big news—King Saul off on raid; come dis way—mos' ketch Feather-foot when sleep soun'. Dodge um, den, but dat make behind Rustlers. Ride like fun, but mebbe too late. You see fire, las' night?"

"No—where? Which way from here?"

Feather-foot pointed in the direction of the Debonay ranch, and the faces of the two lovers turned ghastly pale.

"You are sure?" You think that devil has struck the ranch?" gasped Genteel Guy, his words coming thick and hoarse.

Before the Indian could reply two guards came hurriedly in, bearing between them a bleeding form, barely conscious. A cry of angry despair broke from the lovers, as they recognized the poor fellow, one of the Debonay vaqueros.

He raised his head as they rushed to his side, and gasped:

"Little ole hell to pay at ranch! Spitfire Saul—clean sweep—las' night. Hol' me up—I'm chokin—chokin—"

A gush of blood filled his throat and smothered his further speech. A gurgling groan, then his head fell back.

CHAPTER XX.

KING SAUL SWEEPS THE BOARD.

LIEUTENANT BOYD and Genteel Guy stood as though stunned by this terrible revelation, glaring down upon the face of the poor fellow who had lived just long enough to carry them the startling tidings, then died at their feet without a struggle.

For an instant after that husky, suffocating voice died away, all was silence the most profound. Neither Mark nor Guy seemed capable of speech or motion, while the Rangers, all of whom knew just how matters stood with the young men, and the ladies of the Debonay ranch, looked the sympathy which none of them cared just then to openly express.

Then came a short, hard laugh, at the notes of which Genteel Guy started and shrunk, as though from a blow, and Windy Jess cried out:

"You wouldn't listen to me, or I'd have broken the news to you more considerately than that!"

His face white, his eyes glowing redly, Mark Boyd turned upon the speaker, who involuntarily made a movement as though to guard himself against a blow, only to be checked by the rope around his throat and the stout bonds on his limbs.

"You knew of this raid, then?" demanded the lieutenant.

"I knew it was coming, but I didn't expect it quite so soon. I thought I'd be in time to warn old Debonay, and so I would if King Saul had stuck to his original plans. He must have taken alarm at my desertion, and so crowded the funeral."

Windy Jess spoke without any attempt at subterfuge, now, and spoke the simple truth. He had been so completely recognized as an outlaw, that he knew he could not hope to lie out of the hangman's noose, but a fresh hope flashed across his busy brain, as the vaquero died.

"We're losing precious time," huskily muttered Genteel Guy, touching his comrade in sorrow on the arm. "Sound boot and saddle, or I take the road alone."

"Better hear me through," quickly interposed Windy Jess. "You won't lose anything by it, in the end. It's too late for you to save the ranch, or to head Spitfire Saul off in that direction. Long ere this, he's out of your reach, and you may go into mourning for your dainty darlings—"

The outlaw abruptly checked himself, seeing that he had suffered his nimble tongue to carry him too far. Lieutenant Boyd turned on his heel and made a swift gesture. The clear, sharp notes of a bugle rung through the timber island and far over the prairie, sounding boot and saddle.

"I knew you'd come to the trough for your fodder!" cried Windy Jess, triumphantly. "Swear to let me go free, when the work is done, and I'll guide you to the hidden rendezvous of Spitfire Saul, and help you wipe out the whole gang. I owe 'em one, for spoiling all my plans."

"Walk away with that rope, men!" sternly cried the lieutenant. "Take a double hitch of the end around a tree, and leave him to scare the crows, and serve as warning to birds of his feather. Lively! Then to horse, and ride hard!"

Windy Jess, who had been so confident that his end was fairly won at last, stared in open-mouthed amazement at the speaker, even thinking him only trying to frighten him, when the men at the rope jerked him off his feet and ran him nearly up to the limb over which the lasso had been cast. He writhed and kicked, seeking to burst the stout thongs with which his hands were tied behind his back, a horrible gurgling sound escaping his lips, until the tight-closing lasso effectually choked off all wind. The loose end was swiftly secured to a branch above the reach of wolves, and then, without another glance at the dying outlaw, the Rangers leaped into their saddles and thundered away over the prairie after their chief and Genteel Guy, who were now far in advance, riding as only men ride who have their all at stake.

On, without pause for breath or speech, plying spurs until they shone red in the scorching rays of the sun. On, until the space-devouring horses shone with sweat and were profusely flecked with foam flakes. On, in a steadily lengthening string as the fastest animals sped ahead, but always with those two men riding in front, side by side, each one feeling the same bitter pangs, each one white as a corpse, with hard-set jaws, their eyes blazing as though their hearts were on fire.

It was a long and killing ride, but not once was rein drawn by Ranger, until the site of the Debonay ranch was brought into full view, as they rose a swell in the prairie.

Only the site. And a low groan escaped the lips of the two men riding in advance, as they turned to meet each other's eyes, as though seeking sympathy. For only a faint mist of smoke hung around the place where had stood the rancho and its outbuildings, its stables and corrals. The tidings brought by the dying cowboy had been only too true. Spitfire Saul had indeed been there, and made a clean sweep!

With desperate calmness, Mark Boyd drew rein and permitted his well-nigh exhausted horse to take breath.

"We're killing our nags, and just when we need them most we'll find ourselves afoot," he muttered, turning in his saddle and making a signal that caused his men to check their speed, though still advancing.

The hotter headed cowboy only flashed one indignant glance into his hard-set face, then plied his spurs anew, never drawing rein until he leaped from the saddle beside the ruins of the Debonay ranch.

A frightful scene of ruin and desolation. Truly, Spitfire Saul had swept the board clean!

The heaps of smoking ruins, with only portions of the adobe walls of the rancho standing. Yonder a couple of bloody corpses, riddled with bullets and gashed with knives, as though the sturdy cowboys had fought long and desperately against overwhelming odds. Still beyond, the body of a man doubled over one of the low water-troughs, a crooked trail of blood showing how far he had dragged himself in his burning thirst to gain the cooling element, only to perish as it touched his parched lips. All horror, all ruin, bloodshed and death!

No, not all. As Mark Boyd and the Rangers came riding up, a hoarse, strained voice uttered a cry, and from behind a pile of brush near the stock well, a human form arose and staggered forward. Covered with blood, long hair thickly matted with the crimson dye and dirt, it required more than a first glance to recognize Lucien Debonay, but then Mark Boyd reached his side, and caught the failing form in his arms, showering eager questions upon him, even while ministering to his wants, pouring brandy down his throat until the youth pushed the flask aside.

"Spitfire Saul—his work—ten thousand curses rest upon his head!" grated the youth, his bloodstained face convulsed with rage as he pronounced the name.

Without a word from their leader, the Rangers had turned their jaded horses loose, and scattered over the premises, reading the plentiful sign, allowing nothing to escape their keen and practiced scrutiny. They saw that the attack had not been made in as great force as they had anticipated, from the clean sweep which had been made. The stock had been collected and started off together, heading to the southwest, as though making for the nearest ford on the Rio Grande.

While they were thus engaged, Mark Boyd, with Genteel Guy standing moodily nigh, was drawing the terrible story from the half-distracted youth. Grief, rage, and his wounds, with the loss of blood, had nearly turned his brain, for the time being, and it was no easy

task to get at the bottom facts. For that reason, it is deemed best to give a synopsis of what those questions brought to light.

The attack of the Rustlers had been made on the evening of the night last past, and found the cowboys, as well as the inmates of the Debonay rancho, wholly unsuspecting anything of the sort. So cunningly laid were the plans of Spitfire Saul, so complete his precautions against their miscarriage, that success was insured before a blow was dealt.

With several chosen men, he gained entrance to the house, and without a word of warning, the two maidens and Pierre Debonay were seized and bound, the young man being knocked senseless by a blow from a pistol-butt as he tried to interfere.

When his senses began to return, he felt an intense heat and overpowering smoke, from which he knew that the outlaws must have plundered the ranch and then set it on fire, leaving him to perish in the flames.

He crawled to the door, and finding it fastened, turned to the window, and managed to dash away the shutter, throwing himself outside. The fresh air revived him, and by the growing light of the blazing outbuildings, he saw Spitfire Saul and a number of men gathered around the three captives, on the point of riding away.

The sight of his relatives in such peril—worse than instant death, as he declared, with a fierce curse—lent him strength to draw a pistol, and he fired at King Saul. The lead missed its intended victim, however, and killed the man beside him. Like an echo, came a return shot from the outlaw chief, and feeling as though a mountain had fallen upon his head, Lucien Debonay dropped to the ground. As one in a dream, he realized that Spitfire Saul was firing other shots at him as he lay helpless, and then his senses fled once more.

The scorching of the roaring flames restored him to partial consciousness, and he could just remember dragging himself painfully away from the burning buildings. Beyond that, all was a blank, until the clattering of horses' hoofs awoke him, and he recognized the Rangers, as detailed.

His voice grew stronger and his excitement increased with every sentence. His eyes glittered with an insane fury, as he leaped to his feet, crying:

"You have heard of that demon—you know that he holds that innocent girl in his power—a lamb in the bloody jaws of a hyena!—yet you linger here, like idiots, cowards! You pretend to love her," turning upon Genteel Guy, with a savage snarl of mingled rage, hate and scorn; "yet you make no effort to save her from a fate a thousand fold worse than death! Out upon ye all for craven dastards! If there's a spark of manhood about you, follow me!"

He turned and darted toward the nearest horse, leaping upon its back, and using his bared knife as a spur, thundered away over the prairie at break-neck speed.

An indignant yell burst from the lips of the Ranger who beheld his good horse thus unceremoniously appropriated, and instinctively his rifle leaped to his shoulder.

"Hold! Van Dorn!" cried Boyd, leaping forward and knocking up the muzzle of the weapon, just in time to save the youth. "He's mad—driven crazy by the loss of his friends!"

"Mount and follow!" grated Genteel Guy, starting toward his horse. "A boy like that shall not outdo me!"

Feather-foot darted before him, muttering a few hasty words that caused the excited man to pause.

"Mebbe so dat all play-trick. Mebbe so he try mek you foller, den King Saul open mout' an' swaller you too. He snake like he brudder, Talk-talk. Me tell you, chuck-up, dat so!"

"Be a man, Guy," muttered Mark Boyd, grasping his arm with friendly force. "Look at the horses. How much more work can they stand, without rest and food? That silly coot will race his horse to death, inside of ten miles. We'll see him coming back, or overtake him, when we are fit for traveling. Besides, Feather-foot may be right. He may be playing a part to mislead us, and give Spitfire Saul time to get clear away, or else lead us into an ambush. You hear what Feather-foot says; and we know that he came here with Windy Jess, who called him his brother."

"We save plenty time, by wait," added the Indian. "Me mek plenty cuss to dat, you tink swear mek word stronger. You wait, let hoss git strong; den Feather-foot show you whar King Saul hide. We go slow, den jump him indark. Kick stuffin' out hull shebang, bet you, sweet ole socks!"

Though reluctantly, Genteel Guy was forced to acknowledge that his friends had truth and reason on their side, and he smothered his insane longing to be at work, as best he might.

Collecting such forage as had escaped the general destruction, it was placed before the horses, together with water, and then the Rangers thoroughly scoured the ground, once more, trying to decipher all sign, learning the number of the raiders as the different trails spoke, and settling their probable course after they had plundered the ranch.

It was while they were thus engaged, that two horsemen were seen approaching, from directly opposite directions, their mounts bearing traces of long and hard driving.

They were eagerly met, and still more eagerly questioned by Genteel Guy and Lieutenant Boyd, whose hopes went down to zero again, as they listened to the tales told by the men.

Spitfire Saul had indeed made a clean sweep, not only of the Debonay ranch, but of all those adjoining his range. Not one had been spared, though only this had suffered from fire as well as robbery. A number of men had been killed, in trying to save the stock under their care, and almost every head of horns and hoofs had been run off. These men had struck out for assistance, while their fellows took up the trail of the Rustlers, all of which headed toward the Rio Grande. They begged the Rangers to aid them, but when Mark Boyd told how the head devil of all this trouble, had carried off the ladies, they said no more, but rode away to do what lay in their power.

And then, as the shades of evening began to descend, the Rangers took saddle, and led by Feather-foot, rode rapidly away from the scene of desolation, heading for the desert sink.

CHAPTER XXI.

GIVING A LIFE FOR LOVE.

THIRCE four-and-twenty hours had elapsed since the well-planned raid of Spitfire Saul and his Rustlers on the Debonay ranch, and now, at almost the same hour of the evening that he had burst upon them in their peaceful home, three of the four who were then together sat in gloomy silence, awaiting—what?

Around them were rough rock walls. Above, a ragged roof of the same. Below, an uneven floor of mingled stone and dirt.

The place was damp and chilly, despite the bright fire which crackled in one corner of the irregularly-shaped apartment, and close before which the ranchero and his two daughters now sat on a few hides and skins. From the center of the roof hung an oil lamp, while several candles were stuck in the little niches with which the side walls were so thickly studded. Yet there was a gloom over all, beyond the power of light to banish.

Pierre Debonay hid his face between his hands, fastened by manacles at the wrist. Ora, pale and haggard, sat close to Lucille, holding her hand, but neither broke the silence. What could they say? Their hopes and fears had been thoroughly discussed, over and over again, since the King of the Rustlers brought them here, and bade them ponder well their situation.

"Study it over well," he had said, with a low, meaning laugh. "If you can see the faintest hope of escaping through your own wits, or the coming of your friends, cling to it, and bid me defiance. If not—if you become convinced that the game is wholly in my hands, then weigh your lives, and put a price upon them. I will come for a look at your figures, in good time. If there is not too great a disparity between your estimate of your value and mine, we will join hands and call it a bargain. Until then, peace and contentment dwell with you!"

Though he knew that his stock was gone, that Spitfire Saul would never let go until he had been bled of every remaining dollar, Pierre Debonay was not grieving on that score. Ever present was the vision of the body of his long-lost son, falling with a gasping cry, before the unerring aim of King Saul. Found, only to be lost. Dead, murdered before his very eyes, and he all powerless to aid or save.

A moan of bitter agony broke from his lips, as his gray hairs were bowed still lower, and the two maidens interchanged looks of sad despair. Yet they said nothing. Past experience told them that any attempt at consolation or of offered sympathy, was worse than useless. They could only sit in silence and suffer in seeing him suffer.

But Pierre Debonay was fated to be interrupted from another quarter, that evening, and a quick footfall rung out on the floor, attracting the attention of the women first.

Glancing hastily toward the entrance to the little cavern apartment, they beheld the tall, athletic figure of Spitfire Saul, neatly dressed in broadcloth and spotless linen, bowing politely, a bland smile upon his handsome features.

"Your humble servant, ladies—and yours likewise, Mr. Debonay," he added, as the ranchero dropped his manacled hands and turned quickly at the sound of his voice. "I sincerely trust that you have not grown impatient at my long absence. I would have been here long ago only I have had important work to perform, which I hardly cared to intrust to other hands; in short, I've been laying false trails for the benefit of your friends."

"For which you will have to pay the price, together with all the rest of your rascality and crimes!" boldly cried Lucille, shielding Ora in her arms as the little woman trembled and turned still paler with fear and loathing.

"With you by my side, as a loving partner, sweet one, I can look forward to even that without flinching."

"You come to propose terms for our ran-

som," hastily interposed Pierre Debonay, the old dread returning with doubled force as he heard these mocking, yet significant words. "There is no occasion in wasting breath in idle bickerings. You have the upper hand now, and we can only submit to your exactions. Name your price, and if it is within my power of meeting, rest assured there will be no baggling."

"Your tongue wags mighty freely, old fellow," and as he spoke, something like a frown darkened the brows of the outlaw. "If I were inclined to be suspicious, I would say that you were giving me dirt for my hospitality!"

"Why play so transparent a part?" retorted the ranchero. "We all know what you are, and what you are aiming at; an outlaw, playing for a big stake of money. You are Spitfire Saul, outlaw, thief, road-agent, cutthroat—anything that will bring you ill-gotten gains. We are your captives, unable to fight, powerless to flee, our only hope lying in ransom. Come to the point, then, and say in plain terms what amount of money do you demand in return for our freedom?"

Spitfire Saul smiled grimly.

"You state the case with remarkable clearness, my good fellow, as far as you go; but you haven't got to the bottom of the business, yet."

"What am I to infer from that?"

"That I am not only willing, but really anxious to ransom you. As you say, I have swept away your stock, every hoof and horn, and they are safe enough on the other side of the big river by this time. That being the case, I can afford to be lenient with you."

"Which means, in round figures?" dryly asked Debonay.

"A draft on your banker for twenty thousand dollars."

"And when that is cashed?" eagerly.

"You can say farewell to these ladies, and go your own way, tail-on-end, if you choose."

Pierre Debonay stared into the face of the outlaw, with widely distended eyes, his cheeks turning ghastly pale as he read there a confirmation of those terrible words.

"You don't mean—you can't mean—that sum is for all of us, of course?" he faltered, the words almost choking him.

"For all that your boots hold, no more. Bah!" cried the King of the Rustlers, his blue eyes all aglow with an unholy passion as he gloated over the beautiful faces of his trembling captives. "Are you fool enough to dream even for an instant, that I would open my hand when once it had closed upon such charming creatures as those two? That money could buy them? Then you are a purblind fool, indeed!"

"But you promised—" faltered the dazed ranchero.

"That I would accept a reasonable ransom for you—and I still stand to that offer. You may go, when twenty thousand dollars are paid into my hand, and the devil may go with you for good luck, for all I care! But you go alone."

"I'll die, first!" passionately cried Debonay.

"Not with my consent," laughed the King of the Rustlers. "After the cash is paid, I don't think I'd raise any serious objections, even though death did rob me of a twice-fold father-in-law. Doubtless my charming brides would console me for the sad loss—eh, my nightingales?"

Ora shrunk still further away, but Lucille confronted him with a burning glance of hatred and loathing.

"With knife or pistol, you cowardly assassin!"

"Hard words, my precious, but you will find tenderer terms for use, ere long. I've a most captivating way about me, where the fair sex is concerned, though it may sound a little like boasting to say so, and I warrant that you will not only forget those evil thoughts, but coo sweetly as a sucking dove, within a week of our bridal."

"As for you, listen," and he turned sharply upon the ranchero, who was shivering with excess of impotent rage, as he heard this insolent speech. "I waste mighty few words, when it comes to dealing with those of my own sex. I speak once for all, and never take the trouble to warn twice."

"You will write out a check on your banker for twenty thousand dollars, payable to bearer. I will give it to a tried and trusty fellow. I will wait just one week for his return with the cash. If he comes, all right. You will be set at liberty, to go whither your will dictates. You can raise a company of troops to hunt me out, if you think the project will pay. I will ask no pledges whatever of you, when once the cash is counted over."

"On the other hand, if you refuse to write the check; if aught happens to my runner, and he fails to return on time; if the ransom money is not paid over by the last day of grace—I solemnly swear that I will hang you like a dog!"

"Begin your foul work at once!" desperately cried the ranchero. "I will not give one dollar, unless these two poor girls are included in the terms!"

"They are already provided for. I am a bit of a Mormon, in theory; I mean to put their precepts into practice, now. I will seal myself to them both, and there's no power on either earth or in heaven to hinder me from—"

"*You lie!*" hissed a hoarse voice, and a slight figure darted out of the gloom and leaped upon the king of the Rustlers. "*I'll save them! Take that!*"

The red light shone upon a glancing blade, and with a stifled curse, King Saul went down before the shock, his assailant stumbling and only saving himself from falling by staggering against the rock wall near the fire.

A piercing scream from Lucille, as she leaped to her feet and sprung toward the prostrate outlaw—but she was too late to save the one who had so boldly dashed to their aid.

King Saul jerked forth a revolver, and before the man who had overthrown him, could make a move to defend himself, the weapon spoke venomously, and with a gasping, gurgling moan, he sunk down in a nerveless heap, blood gushing out from beneath his left armpit.

Rolling swiftly over, King Saul avoided the rush of the frantic maiden, and leaping to his feet, covered the bleeding form with his pistol. But he did not waste another shot. He saw that the bloody work was well done. Not dead, but dying, the rash intruder was beyond doing further mischief.

"*You, Kirke Bloodgood!*" he exclaimed, in surprise, then laughing malignantly: "*I thought I finished you back yonder, but it seems that I was mistaken. You've got it now, and a good job, too! Curse you for a traitor!*"

With a low moan of bitter grief, as he recognized, only to see fall bathed in blood, his son, Pierre Debonay staggered over to his side and lifted the drooping head in his arms.

"*Go slow, there!*" grated Spitfire Saul, his pistol covering the wounded youth. "*I'll blow his brains out, if you try to touch one of those weapons!*"

Striding forward, he tore off the belt of weapons which Lucien Debonay wore, and hastily felt his person for hidden arms, then retreated, leaving them alone, to have the wound in his shoulder attended to, and to quiet such alarm as might have been raised among his command, by the pistol-shot.

Pale and ghastly, his grief too intense for either words or sobs, Pierre Debonay held the wounded youth to his breast, vainly striving to stanch the blood that welled from the bullet-wound. Lucille and Ora crouched nigh, unable to do aught, for even they could see that the case was hopeless.

Lucien Debonay lay like one already dead, save for his quick, fitful breathing, but after the passage of a few minutes his half closed eyes opened, and with a faint smile playing over his dark, handsome features, he feebly uttered:

"Don't grieve over me—I'm not worthy."

"My son—murdered—for us!" groaned the ranchero.

"I tried to save you, but I was a fool," said the youth, his voice stronger and freer, a hectic flush coming into his cheeks. "*I was mad—I did not stop to think or reason. I could only remember that you were in deadly peril, and when I saw that hell-hound—when I heard him uttering his foul threats, my brain seemed to give way, and I thought only of killing him, to save you, my—Lucille!*"

There was a strange intensity in his gaze as he looked at the weeping maiden whose name he faintly pronounced. She grasped his clammy hand, and he raised it to his lips, kissing it passionately.

"If that devil had killed me outright, it would have been better for me!" he cried, with a sudden heat, dropping her hand and averting his face. "*Then you would have mourned over me, and never recalled my memory save with sad affection. If I could only die now, before I could utter the damning truth—but I won't! I owe you that much.*"

"I am not your son—not your brother, Lucille!"

A faint moan from Pierre Debonay, but it was of pure grief, not of anger or surprise. He believed the brain of the dying youth was failing him as the sands ran lower.

"You think I'm flighty," said the youth, speaking more calmly, but still with a remarkable strength and evenness for one so near death's portals. "*I'm not. I'm telling the truth. My real name is Kirke Bloodgood. I am not the son you lost. That was all a cunning lie, for the purpose of gain. He set it going—my brother. For years he had it in view, and tutored me in the part I was to play. If you believed the tale, and owned me as your son, we were to see that your will was made in my favor, and then your death was to come about. Just how, we never positively agreed.*"

He paused, through exhaustion, and for some minutes all was silence. Pierre Debonay was like one suddenly transformed to stone. He could not believe that these words were true, convince himself that the youth was lying, even while dying.

Ora and Lucille, stunned, confused, listened without the power of speech, terribly shocked

by the strange and wholly unexpected revelation.

"Until that day, I had never seen you, Lucille," continued Kirke, more faintly. "*When I did, I felt for the first time a strong aversion to carry on the plot we had taken so much pains to concoct. I told brother so, but he would not listen. I was afraid of him, and so I floated on, every day rendering my punishment the more acute, for I learned to love you, Lucille—not as a sister, but as the one woman in the entire world with whom I could be content to exist—as a wife!*"

A mocking laugh from the entrance to the cave-chamber, cut him short, and King Saul, his left shoulder freshly bandaged, stepped to the center of the apartment, sneering:

"So that solves the mystery of your disappearance, so abruptly that you could not stop to say good-by to your mates and fellow-cut-throats, my good lad!"

"Peace!" sternly cried Lucille, turning upon the outlaw, her dark eyes flashing indignantly. "*He is dying. Mock him not, you coward!*"

King Saul, despite his native audacity, shrunk back from her haughty reproof, and Kirke Bloodgood, his voice rapidly failing him, the flush leaving his cheeks, brokenly muttered:

"It's growing dark—something chokes me, so—it's hard to talk. In my breast—a book—I wrote it all down. Read, and believe. I swear all true. Pity—forgive—Lucille—where are you? One word—one kiss—as forgive—"

With a spasmodic effort he raised himself to a sitting posture, his arms outstretched toward the maiden; but it was only an expiring effort. His arms dropped, his head fell back, a gush of blood burst through his lips, and the end had come.

With all his sins upon his head, Kirke Bloodgood had gone to face his Maker.

"Quite a dramatic exit!" sneered Spitfire Saul, as the three captives gathered closer around the dead, whom they had learned to look upon as son and brother. "*I never gave the cub credit for so much wit, though he was always a tough little cuss when he came to a tight pinch. For that, if for nothing else, he shall have a royal burial. Once a Rustler, always a Rustler!*"

"You lie, King Saul!" cried a clear voice from behind. "*I was a Rustler, but I have reformed, and become a Ranger!*"

With a snarling curse, Spitfire Saul whirled around, jerking forth a revolver, then staggered back, with a cry of horror.

Before him stood the figure of Queen Dixie, the red light falling full upon her face and the leveled pistols she held!

CHAPTER XXII.

QUEEN DIXIE'S GRAND ROUND-UP.

FOR one instant King Saul stood motionless, with wildly staring eyes, believing he was looking upon the ghost of his former queen. In that brief space of time, he recalled that horrible scene—the corpse of Lofly Dick seated upon the throne, heretofore occupied only by himself as King of the Rustlers; the robes wrapped around his bloody carcass, the gilt crown upon his head; the figure of the traitress queen beside him, their heads together as in loving caress.

He saw all this, and more. He remembered returning to the desert sink much earlier than he had intended, drawn thither by the red reflection that told of a conflagration. He saw the building in ruins. He saw amid the coals and ashes, the headless, limbless trunk of what had once been a human being, and beside it other bones, the remnant of what had once been bright and beautiful Queen Dixie. So he thought, then; so he had never seen cause for doubting, until now.

He knew that he had left the lamps and candles burning, and naturally supposed that, by some accident, some of these had fallen and set the building afire.

But now—he saw that it was no ghost, but dangerous flesh and blood that confronted him, and he threw his pistol hand forward, only to have the weapon fall from his nervous grasp, as a burst of flame-tinged smoke came from the revolver clasped in Queen Dixie's hand. A curse of rage and pain, then he sought to use his left hand, but once more the pistol spoke, and both arms fell to his side, helpless, each one shattered at the elbow joint.

He could scarcely realize this terrible truth, when a third jet of fire spouted out of the woman's revolver, and his right leg failed beneath its weight, and he came to the floor with a sickening thud.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the woman, her face convulsed with deep and bitter vengeance. "*That is better fun than shooting at pipes, my gallant King Saul! You little thought when so carefully training me to the use of your favorite weapon, that time would come when that very skill would prove fatal to you; when it would disarm and lay you at my feet, a helpless, miserable cripple!*"

A grating curse broke from his lips, and gathering all his remaining powers, Spitfire Saul leaped to his feet, and, though his right leg gave way beneath him, sprung toward the

taunting avenger, only to fall at her feet, howling, cursing, blaspheming, tearing and biting at the hard floor with his teeth, his left knee shattered by Queen Dixie's fourth bullet.

"Nay, nay, my honest fellow!" she laughed springing back as she fired the fourth shot. "*I don't doubt your affection in the least, but the time has gone by forever when I could submit myself to your gentle caresses. You must remember that I belong to another, now. Did you not wed us and pronounce the blessing yourself? I'm no longer your mistress—I'm the bride of Lofly Dick!*"

"Curse you—curse you!" howled the King of the Rustlers, trying in vain to drag himself near enough to seize her. "*If I only had your throat between my teeth—*"

"Your kiss would send me to paradise by lightning express, no doubt. All the same, I prefer to remain upon earth yet a little longer—if only to witness your last dance—on air, at the end of a rope!"

"Hullo! this way, you hounds!" yelled King Saul, at the top of his voice. "*Awake, you infernal sleepers—*"

"Hark!" cried Queen Dixie, as she leaped forward and brought her little boot down upon his blood-dripping lips with spiteful violence, then springing back beyond reach and bending her ear in listening. "*If the hounds sleep, they'll waken only in the other world, Spitfire Saul! Listen!*" as the rapid report of firearms came rolling through the underground gallery. "*Those are my bull-dogs giving tongue. Rangers against Rustlers! Honest men against thieves and assassins! And all brought about by a woman—by me, Spitfire Saul! I guided them here after vainly visiting my tomb—ha! ha!—at the old sink. I pledged my word that this night should see the death of King Saul and the total extermination of his bloody gang. I am keeping my oath. Three cheers for Queen Dixie's grand round-up!*"

Laughing shrilly, she danced around the blood-covered form of the King of the Rustlers, taunting him, mocking his bitter agony with words and gestures, seeming—what she certainly must have been, just then—some wild maniac, driven to frenzy by the ruthless deeds of this man.

Speechless, terror-stricken, unable to fully comprehend the purport of this frightful scene, Lucille and Ora, tight clasped in each other's arms, cowered back against the rock wall, watching the mad dancing of the woman in masculine garb, trembling with the fear of her turning her insane rage upon them.

Pierre Debonay saw, heard nothing. He clasped the lifeless body of Kirke Bloodgood to his bosom, slowly rocking to and fro, soft croonings issuing from his parched lips. For the time being he was back in the long-ago, soothing his tired child who had fallen asleep in his arms wearied out with play.

The fierce firing without had ceased, but still Queen Dixie mocked the writhing, cursing, impotent wretch, as she danced around his hard and bloody couch, now darting near enough to tap his lips with her boot, now stooping to pluck his beard, his curling locks, now covered with mingled dirt and blood; all the time boasting of the cunning and complete manner in which she had betrayed him and his to the Rangers.

Neither she nor either of the spellbound girls observed the dark form that crept into the edge of the firelight, coming from the passage which connected the cave chamber with the outer world. She realized nothing of her peril, until a spout of flame shot toward her, and a bullet crashed its way through her heated brain. One gasping, gurgling moan, and then she fell across the form of the crippled Rustler, who vainly strove to seize and rend her, snarling and growling like a wild beast.

The slayer leaped forward and dragged her body beyond reach of the crippled chief, unheeding his cries, his curses, holding her head upon his knees, his voice trembling and broken as he uttered, with a mournful whine:

"*I had to do it, purty dear—so I did, now, honey! It was ornighdy hard, but I had to, don't ye see, little lady? It was in the oath—kill all traitors—you know that, honey! An' I knowed it was you that sold us out. Fer me, I don't keer a cuss. I'd jest shet my eyes an' grin as I kicked the bucket. But the boss—an' the boys; you know thar was them, now don't ye, honey? I couldn't let you go, seein' that! But it was turrible hard—most monstrous hard—an' me lovin' of ye wuss then ef you was my own kid—*"

"Help! you cursed, whining idiot!" snarled Spitfire Saul, still fierce, still overbearing, though the loss of blood was rapidly draining his life away. "*They're coming—help, you hound, or I'll—*"

Those were the last words he ever uttered in this world.

With a rush, the Rangers, led by Mark Boyd and Genteel Guy, filled the narrow tunnel, and hearing them, Brocky Bill raised his revolver to die fighting; but before it could come to a level, a bullet from Boyd's pistol struck him between the eyes, killing him instantly.

By a strange chance, his suddenly contracting fingers, discharged his pistol, and the bullet

struck Spitfire Saul under the chin, passing out at the top of his head, shattering his skull and scattering his brains over the floor.

Scarce heeding him, Boyd and Genteel Guy leaped across the terribly mutilated corpse, and with joyous cries, folded the trembling, sobbing maidens to their breasts.

A moment such as that, richly repaid them all for the great toil and suffering they had, one and all, been called upon to endure that night when King Saul and his Rustlers made their swoop upon the Debonay ranch.

There is not much more to be added to this little drama of wild life on the Southwestern border.

Queen Dixie's grand round-up had proven a complete success, so far as breaking up the gang of outlaws immediately under the leadership of Spitfire Saul. The majority had died fighting desperately, though the surprise was complete. A few were captured, but they were never taken away from the Hill Retreat. The Rangers had suffered some loss, and while still burning with fury, while their lieutenant was busied with composing the fair Ora, they made a hurried muster of prisoners and strung them up to the nearest trees.

Lieutenant Boyd read them a severe lecture when he discovered what had transpired, but he was too happy in the restoration of his loved one to do more than scold, and the grim Rangers laughed in their sleeves at that.

Lucille remembered what Kirke Bloodgood had said in his dying moments, and before the corpse was given decent burial Genteel Guy, at her request, secured the book of which he had spoken, and kept it until a more favorable opportunity came for examining its contents.

At first Pierre Debonay violently resisted their efforts to remove the corpse from his arms, scolding them in a harsh whisper lest they should waken his tired baby boy; but at length he was cajoled into putting the infant into its crib, and while Lucille, weeping at the pitiful sight, led him to one side, the last rites were performed and the remains of the misguided lad were forever hidden from mortal view.

Pierre Debonay dropped off into a deep sleep, which was not broken until late the next day. Then, to the great joy of his children, he awoke in full possession of his senses, the events of the past night seeming to him like some frightful dream.

He was kept in that delusion until after the house of their friend who offered them shelter until they could decide on their future course was reached, but then he was made to understand all.

The entire story was written down in the little book by Kirke Bloodgood, who, almost from the first time of seeing Lucille Debonay, revolted from playing the cunning part in which he had been so carefully trained by his unscrupulous brother.

The story told by Fred Bloodgood, *alias* Windy Jess, proved to have been a cunningly-woven tissue of truth and falsehood.

The little boy had indeed been saved from the jaws of the alligator, by Martin, the Swamp-Fox, but it had died while he lay in the swamp, fearing pursuit. He made his way to the secret rendezvous of the Pony Club, where his two sons lived with him for some time, one an infant, born while its mother was with the outlaws. Here he talked over his plans for revenge, bemoaning fate for depriving him of his infant, through whose agency he had intended to strike such bitter blows against the man who had lashed him like a cur.

The eldest boy treasured all this in his mind, and remembered, too, old Martin mentioning the curious mole with which the arm of the child was marked.

As time passed on, Fred Bloodgood saw his way to making a rich stake out of the secret, when he discovered that Pierre Debonay still lived, and was wealthy. He scarred the arm of his brother, and finally produced him as the heir, trumping up that story of the heroically treated snake-bite, to account for the scar covering the spot where the telltale mole should have been.

It will be remembered that Mark Boyd took Genteel Guy away from the Debonay ranch, after he was discharged by the irate ranchero. Together they took up the trail of Windy Jess, and followed it to the vicinity of the desert sink. There they were at a loss. The trail had been obliterated by the night breezes, shifting the loose sands, and had not Spitfire Saul sent his men away in the night, when he wished to be left alone to wreak his vengeance upon the woman who had sold him to his enemies, they would probably have been forced by lack of water, to abandon the quest, just as scores of others had before them.

As they kept watch and watch, in a depression in the desert, that night, they heard muffled hoof-strokes, and cautiously spying, saw two of the Rustlers riding by. They lay low until morning, having marked well the direction from whence the night-riders came, then took up the trail.

It led them direct to the sink, and after much

cautious spying around, they ventured down the winding trail.

They found Queen Dixie, and released her from the dead. She was a long time in recovering her consciousness, but when her eyes did open, they were filled with the light of reason, not of madness, as the two men dreaded would be the case, after the frightful ordeal she had passed through.

With her own hands she unearthed the corpse of a youth who had died from wounds received in a raid, some time before, and clasping the vacant ring of the handcuff around the decaying wrist, piled fuel over the bodies, and scattering oil around, applied the torch.

Watching until it was certain that the fire would not die out without performing its work, she led the two men away and out of the desert.

She told them her story, and vowing bitter vengeance against King Saul and all of his gang, she assumed the disguise of Feather-foot. Enlisted in the service of the Rangers, she performed her duty well, spying upon the Rustlers, waiting and watching for a chance to "round them up."

How this chance came, and how it was improved, the reader has already seen.

Is there any necessity for stating that, not many weeks after the big raid of King Saul, there was a double wedding celebrated, the principal parties in which were old friends of ours?

Or that Pierre Debonay forgave the audacity of his one-time foreman in falling in love with his peerless daughter?

Hardly.

THE END.

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